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Monsieur Hulot's Holiday

JEAN-CLAUDE CARRIÈRE

Monsieur Hulot's Holiday

With Illustrations by

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Translated from the French by

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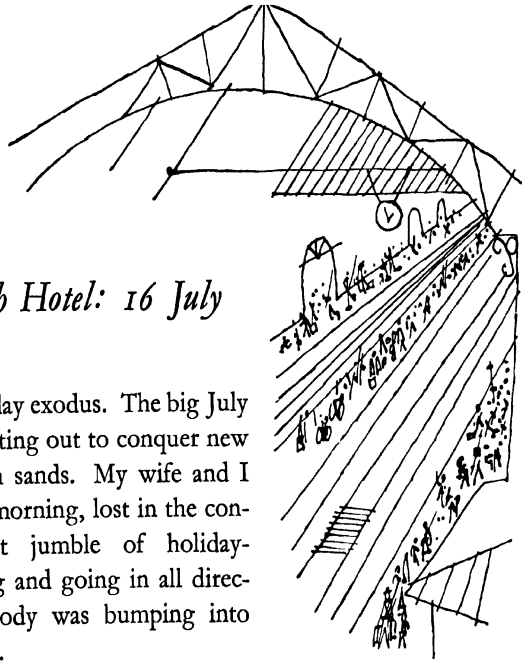
Monsieur Hulot's Holiday

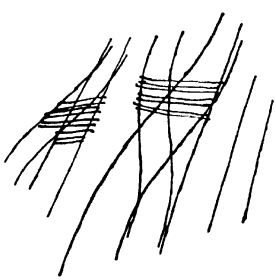


The Beach Hotel: 16 July

The great holiday exodus. The big July migration. Setting out to conquer new skies and fresh sands. My wife and I left Paris this morning, lost in the confused, strident jumble of holiday-makers coming and going in all directions. Everybody was bumping into everybody else.

Knapsacks and fishing-rods, startled officials mauled, man-handled and stripped of their golden buttons, whistles, shouting, tramping feet, cries of smacked children, puffing of engines.

There were a lot of people in this particular station. There were also, most unfortunately, three platforms. Platform number one, platform number two and platform number three.



All the loudspeakers were hoarse.

Have you noticed how

every traveller, however sensible and however punctual, loses all dignity and composure the moment he enters even the most inoffensive station? He runs about, panics, brandishes his tickets, gets separated from his luggage and, when he learns at last that there are another fifty minutes to wait, is incapable of grasping the fact.

That was us. We spun about in the milling crowd like tops.

With ineffectual pomposity, the loudspeakers joined in, shouting:

ATTENTION ALL PASSENGERS.

"Ssh!" went everyone.

HERE IS AN ANNOUNCEMENT . . .

We all focused on the speakers. Oh dear! A humming, grinding, crackling whistling, terminating in:

PLATFORM NUMBER . . . NUMBER . . .

1, 2, or 3? Impossible to say.

Which train was it? And going where?

"Over there!" cried someone. "Platform Three!"

We stampede down into the subway. On all sides of us, suspended round the loudspeakers like criminals awaiting their verdicts or hens their grain, sweat and pant other holiday-makers. Children, straw-hatted women, men like haggard beasts of burden. Shrimp-nets waving overhead. Little buckets, little shovels, rakes and flowered skirts.

ATTENTION . . . ATTENTION . . . PLATFORM NUMBER . . . PLATFORM NUMBER . . .

What number?

"What did he say?" Everybody starts running. "What did he say?"

"He said Saint-Malo . . ."

"No, Lorient . . ."

"Lorient? Couldn't have been!"

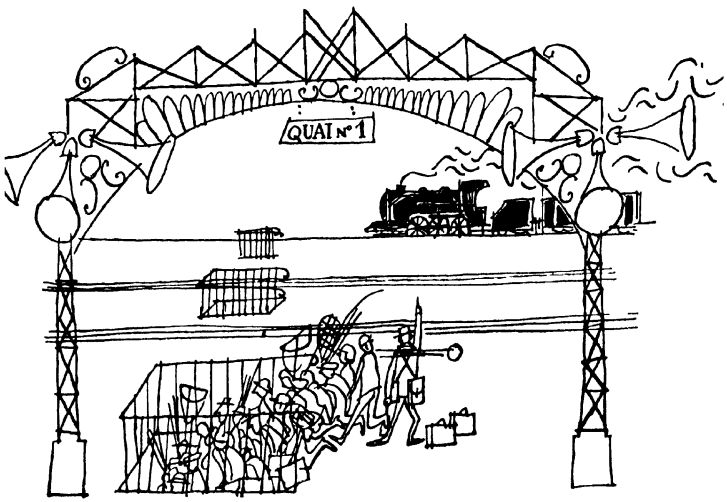
In the crowd swarming round me I do my best not to lose sight of the back of my wife, who is struggling several yards ahead.

The handle of a suitcase snaps.

Panting heavily we emerge on to platform 3. But the train isn't there. Disappeared. Unmistakably gone.

ATTENTION . . . ATTENTION . . . PASSENGERS TRAVELLING TO . . .

Crackling sound. However hard one tries, one catches nothing. A train comes in on platform 2. We plunge wildly back into the subway which has never seen



such confusion before. I run backwards and forwards, climb, descend, climb again. Sighs and curses. Children howl. They have been promised sand and water; all they've got is a station and smacks. Women shout. The men follow behind.

The loudspeakers give out gravely incomprehensible advice. A woman's shoe, fed up with being twisted in all directions, disengages itself from the foot of its wearer and lies abandoned.

When, with strained and aching sinews, we arrive on platform 2, the train is no more than a black blob disappearing in smoke. Another one missed. I don't feel I can carry on. I think I'll just sit down on one of the steps and spend my holiday there. Why bother? Why put up with all this noise and nervous tension?

ATTENTION . . . ATTENTION . . .

Frantically we cup our ears. Hopeless.

"Platform number 1!" shrieks someone.

Off we all rush. We're in the subway again. I see nothing. I hear nothing. We're lost in darkness and confusion.

ATTENTION . . . ATTENTION . . . The trains dance mockingly about us. I am exhausted, out of breath, near the end of my tether, and we haven't started yet. From time to time my wife turns round to see if I am still following. Posters proclaim the charms of Auvergne from the subway walls. People push me, tread on my heels, squash me.

Ah, another train.

Can it be ours?

By one of those miracles which only Fate, or perhaps my wife, is capable of working, at last, for better or for worse, we found ourselves seated in an overheated compartment. My wife installed herself facing the engine because of her digestion and I sat opposite.

At the same time every year, we had gazed out on the same woods, trees, interminable hills, the same unfinished landscape.

"How green everything is!" cried my wife.

We saw lines of cars waiting at the level-crossings, each crammed to the roof, bristling with fishing tackle, white with dust and grit. Everybody from everywhere setting out in one huge circus procession. Engines snorting. Enthusiastic fingers pointing out historic sites, celebrated mountains.

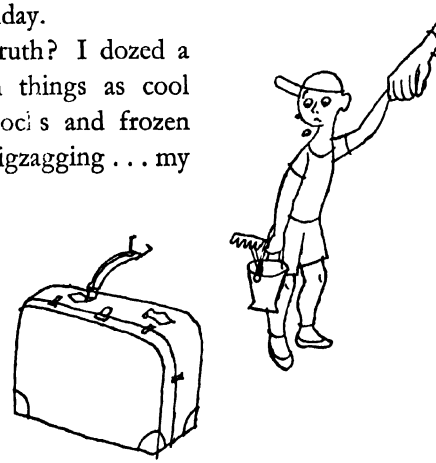
"How green everything is!" my wife cried again.

Tired, at last, of all the greenery she pointed a finger:

"Oh, look, there's a cow . . .! And there's another!"

From meadow to meadow, from cow to cow, we sped off on holiday.

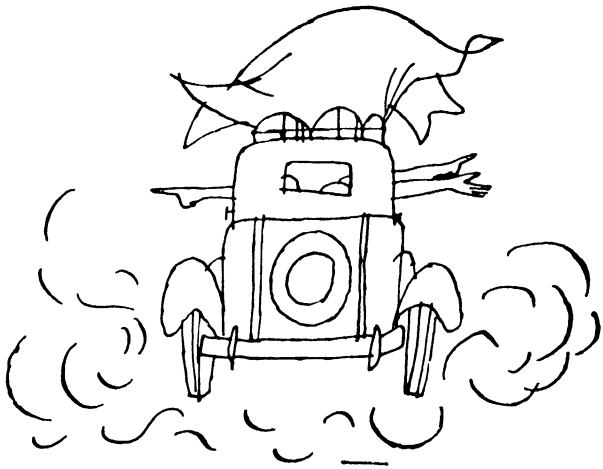
Should I admit the truth? I dozed a little, dreamed of such things as cool streams rushing over rocks and frozen lakes where trout were zigzagging . . . my



wife's enthusiasms reached me from an infinite distance . . . when I was suddenly jerked out of it by a series of detonations.

Definitely detonations.

I started up, my panama sliding on to my nose. What on earth was happening? A shooting party?



I looked at my wife; she appeared not to have noticed anything.

"Look, more cows," she said, smiling. "Over there . . . You see?"

"Where?"

"Near the stile."

"So there are, dear."

But . . . Another series of explosions. An accident? Guns? A duel in a meadow?

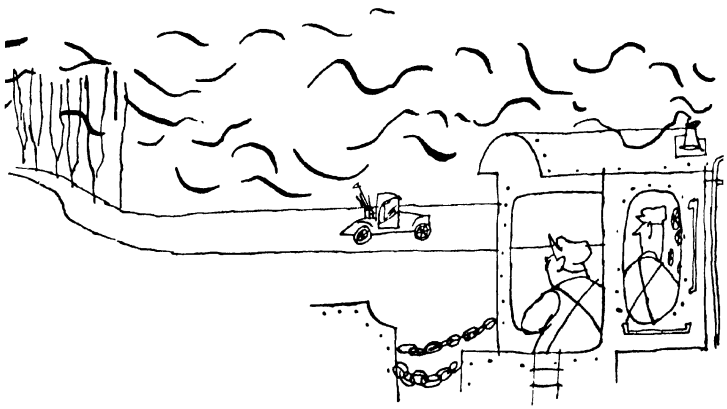
Prompted by my natural and, I fear, insatiable curiosity I ignored the trilingual advice engraved on enamel plaques and leant out of the window.

"Mind your hat, dear," cautioned my wife.

Weaving between poplars, a little road skirted the railway track. On it I noticed a moving object. It was a quite extraordinary animal—or it could have been a car.

Four wheels, a flapping hood, a cork in the radiator. Definitely a car.

As the road twisted I saw it from the side, and then again from the front, spluttering, advancing in leaps like the kangaroo from the Zoo which we visit every spring, and emitting deafening bangs all over the road. A shrimp-net was waving like a white flag from the



back. One got the impression that the whole thing was running out of ammunition.

Proud, broad-beamed limousines were overtaking the little contraption with merciless scorn, crowding it off the road, ignoring it. It was, one felt, a courteous and gentle, though sometimes indignant machine.

I lost sight of it behind a hill, but for a long time distant cracklings and explosions scattered whole flocks of starlings.

"If you don't put your head in, you'll get something in your eye," said my wife.

To reach our seaside resort—let me confess I dislike cold water intensely and never bathe—we are forced, after the torpor induced by the rail journey, to undergo the tedium of another twenty-five miles in a bus. I always feel that the less said about buses the better; this one was excessively hot.

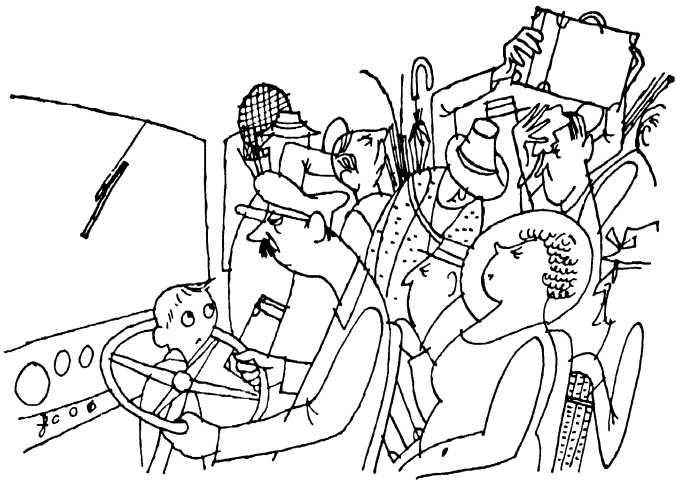
Near me, in the jolting furnace, was a modest young girl whom I had already noticed in the corridors of the train where her arrival had been appreciated by others besides myself. Well-shaped features, a dainty body, hair plaited around her head. She was travelling alone. Really very charming . . .

Already a number of people had addressed me. I recognised them: last year's holiday-makers.

"It's hot," murmured my wife from time to time, sighing and heaving her bosom.

Parrot-like, I replied:

"Even hotter than in the train, my dear."



That was the reply my wife expected.

For about ten minutes, suffocated, thrown on top of each other, we had jolted along a road as pitted as the path to hell—though certainly not paved with good intentions—when for the second time that day a salvo of artillery assaulted my ear-drums.

"Heat-lightning, dear," said my wife.

Crash! Pop-thump-crash! God Almighty, it was the little crate on wheels I'd seen from the train. There was no mistaking that particular racketing uproar.

It swerved in front of us as we turned a corner. Like a plucked duck with a pointed rump, it was tacking

from one side of the narrow road to the other. For some time we followed in its tortuous wake. It was travelling at an angle, nose in the air, sowing the road with nuts and bolts, swivelling at the whim of the steering-wheel, sometimes keeping to the actual road, sometimes leaving it for the grass verge, slowing down for no reason, hiccupping and almost stopping, and then dashing off at full speed with a capricious burst of energy.

The horn of the bus grew weak demanding the right to overtake.

The vehicle paid absolutely no attention; perhaps it was admiring the countryside. After all, it too was on holiday.

Passing through a village, it braked and came to a gentle halt a little way ahead of us. A dog, the incarnation of idyllic laziness, lay sprawled asleep in the middle of the road. The high-pitched horn of the little car begged it politely to shift to one side, once, twice, thrice. But to no purpose. The dog, not without effort, raised sleepy eyelids, but did not move. It knew that those wobbly wheels with their twisted spokes would never harm it. This car was not like other cars. The animal had recognised a friend.

And perhaps I had, too.

When at last the dog stretched itself and got up, its limbs still stiff, it was in its own time, and without a trace of anger or insolence. It advanced slowly and fearlessly towards the car and I saw a hand, a man's

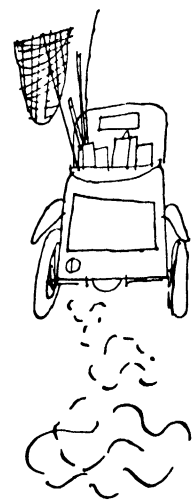
hand, slide out through the hood and stroke the trustful head. An *entente*, an understanding had been established.

The car set off again.

The Beach Hotel. The hotel hall. Our destination. No more travel. We'd reached the sea.

In a state of coma we awaited our summons to the evening meal, the first meal of the holiday.

Holidays, sun and rain, heat and wind, the herded, sheeplike slowness of the days. Strange life, more monotonous than the motion of the waves along the beach, but not without a certain, curious charm. Days of passivity. Secret naps. It's a lullaby I know backwards—I've been singing it for twenty years.



Little beach I always rediscover with the same conflicting emotions: the longing to do nothing, the satisfaction of being close to the sea and the consuming dread of days all so alike that they run indistinguishably into each other.

Supervised liberty . . .

I'm an ordinary, middle-aged

man who works in an office and who, year in, year out, does the same thing. Probably that's already apparent.

We'd been in the hotel two hours, our cases were unpacked and the register was signed and already we were at a loss for something to do. My wife had suggested a walk, but it was late to go out, moreover the sky looked threatening.

The hall is also the hotel lounge. As soon as I enter it, I feel as if I've never been away. I don't feel a bit uprooted. Familiar smells, colours and sounds surround me, reassure me, sometimes worry me, for though I return with inexpressible satisfaction to a place I know well, I am also aware that it would only need a slight irregularity to destroy this sense of peace and equilibrium.

Unreal . . . The Beach Hotel is unreal. I only feel at home there from habit and laziness.

The hall is a fairly large room decorated with potted plants and white curtains and one or two little water-colours which show the pier in rough and calm weather respectively. There are also pictures of boats and some still-lifes of fish; a large 'restful' room, as my wife loves to say.

In a tiny aquarium three expressionless goldfish twist about among the weeds and small white stones. The aquarium always makes me think of the hall. Do

these human fish also feel at home in their tank, and do they rub up against their static algæ with the same pleasure as real fish against the weeds of a pond? Have they ever known the weeds of a pond?

Guests were departing sullenly. We were just arriving, excitedly. A place of transit suited to good-byes; a resting-place for a man like myself. That is why I examine the *décor* so minutely. The walls are a light, faded green, the tables brown. A few anæmic flowers droop in vases. A few lamps. No lift, naturally. On the left of the entrance, the reception-desk in false mahogany behind which Monsieur Ménard, the proprietor, is enthroned.

Immediately opposite the main door, the staircase leads to the bedrooms.

The Colonel, standing up, is describing his campaigns. Brittle as parched wood, his moustaches like the horns of a bull, on his head a sort of helmet which faintly resembles his former *képi*, the Colonel (retired) has always been an expert in the art of losing wars and of winning promotion.

"This first-rate fellow Bichenard," he is saying, "already a colonel, was in charge of the place . . . Transferred to Nancy at this time . . . I had only two pips and, believe me, I was already champing at the bit . . . Bichenard said to me: 'I give you *carte blanche* . . . Don't use it as a pretext for hoisting a flag of the same colour. . . .' "

He's an old regular here, almost part of the furni-

ture. Resentful of the fact that he is on the retired list, he talks interminably, imposes himself on everyone, recruits, voluntarily or by force, a circle of listeners composed mainly of his immediate neighbours, women and children, who tire very quickly. Finally his wife is left, the only faithful member of his public.

He hasn't finished.

He never has finished. His monologues only break off at meal-times.

"Faithful to my strategic principles . . . which consist in ignoring the enemy until the last minute, for, don't you see, the best way of not losing a war is not to start one. . . ."

Monsieur Smutte, a Belgian business man with tortoiseshell glasses and a plump face, is fidgeting with some papers on a table. From time to time the waiter calls out:

"Monsieur Smutte! Te . . . Telephonè!"

With his immaculate shorts, his new crocodile-skin belt and his smart shirt, it is evident that Monsieur Smutte believes himself to be on holiday.

He is wrong . . . The bankers' drafts, the bills, the cheques and the memoranda—Monsieur Smutte could not survive without them. Business, business . . . The Beach Hotel is merely a branch of his large office in Brussels. The telephone summons Monsieur Smutte at each and every minute.

Monsieur Smutte and Madame Smutte: two more familiar faces.

In a corner at the right of the entrance is the library —half a dozen shelves containing several tattered copies of the *Reader's Digest*, some detective novels, a few books by Delly and George Sand. A young man (a philosopher for all I know), whose face is both sad and knowledgeable, is to be found there morning and evening. It is said that he is engaged in the highest studies.

Pipe in mouth, he is brooding over a magazine.

A little apart, behind a hedge-like flower-stand, an old lady is busy at her embroidery.

Others are dozing, yawning, reading, knitting, playing cards. The waiter, a stammering, stuttering old shellfish (the other waiters are on holiday, whilst he, pitiful incompetent, has no alternative but to remain), hovers round us like a spectre. He never fails to look as if he is wondering what all these strangers are doing at the Beach Hotel. He detests us. He is our bad conscience.

Some busybody is twiddling with the controls of the wireless set.

The news bulletin is just beginning.

"Here is the news . . . The speech made by the Under-Secretary of State for Financial Affairs at Noeux-les-Mines has been echoed this morning in the Assembly. It will be remembered that the Under-Secretary of State had declared in substance . . . The conclusions have resulted in a communication to the press . . ."

"Monsieur Smutte! Te . . . Telephone!"

Monsieur Smutte leaps to his feet.

"—at the end of the morning the President of the Council received a delegation of planters from Kapok on the Ivory Coast. The extension of Kapok in the region of Bingerville, and the numerous problems which it poses, have been presented at length . . ."

Furious at the radio, which is drowning his voice, the Colonel is talking louder and louder.

"Anticipating the trend of modern warfare, I had already initiated the first aerial reconnaissances . . ."

The radio will not admit defeat.

"From Tokyo: news of the fighting in Asia is today relatively slight . . ."

"—and for hand-to-hand fighting," shouts the Colonel, "nothing will ever equal the bayonet . . ."

"—restriction of information, ordered by the Chief-of-Staff, in respect of anything relating to operations . . ."

The hubbub increases.

But I no longer hear it. I am thinking about the young girl I'd seen riding in the bus. It was her first visit here and her name was Martine. When she got out at a villa close to the hotel, she attracted the attention of all the young men on the beach. The moment she arrived she put on the record of a popular song which enquires interminably what the weather is like in Paris. It is the dirge, the theme-song of our holidays, of our exile.

Martine interests me, as do all those who discover these parts. Confronted by their *naïveté* and enthusiasm, I long to provide them with information, to guide their first steps. When I see a new face I feel, to some extent, as though I were the host here. Martine . . . already the target of longing glances from a multitude of men. Martine, what is going to happen to you here? What intrigues, what revolutions will come about on your account?

"—and here are the latest stock market quotations . . ."

Monsieur Smutte, who was returning from the telephone, pricked up his ears. All he heard was:

"—and as for anti-tank guns, excuse me while I have a good laugh!"

"Silence!" Monsieur Smutte requested.

The Colonel lowered his voice. Those who were reading did not bother to look up. The lady who was embroidering continued to concentrate on her needle and thread, the intellectual on his magazine, Monsieur Fred on his *apéritif*. The waiter drew back the curtain of a window and glanced out.

My wife leant across the table.

"You'd better take your drops, dear. We'll be eating in a quarter of an hour."

"Eh! Yes." Three silly little drops in a glass of water. Three little weeks at the seaside. There was really very little to choose between them.

Suddenly it happened.

Firstly, to take things in their correct order, the Colonel got a speck of dust in his eye and suspected sabotage. Then an abnormally ferocious draught invaded the hall, a veritable tornado. Monsieur Smutte threw himself stomach downwards on top of the table to save his papers which were already in flight. The Colonel's wife, who was pouring out tea for a friend, gazed with horror as the stream from the spout, diverted by the wind, sprayed all over her guest. Magazines and hats flew in all directions. Hair stood on end, moustaches bristled and the paper table-cloths and a pile of wafer biscuits scattered across the room. Waving his napkin, the waiter trampled frenziedly on everything falling within his orbit—scarves, wafers, Monsieur Smutte's papers. Slippers and beach shoes shot through the air. For my part, oblivious of what I was doing, I doubled my dose of drops. Luckily my wife noticed it. Though probably it wouldn't have made very much difference.

But the wind, bursting in on our cosy little world, was wrecking our equilibrium.

Standing at the entrance were two new suitcases, a

number of packages, some fishing-rods . . .

Pulling aside the curtain, which was blowing out against me, I saw, drawn up in front of the hotel, in front of *our* hotel, still smoking and shaking, the little car we had passed on the road, that deafening little duck which had . . .

I had no difficulty in recognising it.

It had dared to come here? Dared to join us?

What a nerve!

My wife remarked:

"What a gale!"

"The door!" cried Monsieur Smutte, still sprawling on his papers which, one by one, were eluding him. "The door!"

Monsieur Ménard, the proprietor, holding a pan of filthy water in both hands, dashed forward to close it.

He stretched out his foot . . .

At that moment the door shut of its own accord. Monsieur Ménard, confused, disorientated, thrown off his balance, slid forward, upsetting the contents over the tiled floor.

A man entered.

It was without any doubt the driver of the little crate on wheels. A tall man, backbone ceremoniously arched, legs stiff, heels glued together. A nose shaped like a periscope, a pipe perpetually at the ready, round eyes which contemplated the havoc with complete innocence.

All eyes turned on him. But he appeared to notice no person or object in the room, not even the pool of water in which Monsieur Ménard was paddling.

The hurricane had subsided. Angrily, with great difficulty, Monsieur Smutte levered himself up from the table.

The new arrival took up his two suitcases, one in

each hand, and crossed to the reception-desk where Monsieur Ménard was lying in wait.

He raised his hat. He continued to raise his hat again and again, dropping the cases to the ground each time in order to get a grip on it, then picking them up again.

"Your name?" demanded the proprietor.

"..."

The new arrival's pipe was clamped between his teeth. He was definitely muttering something, but it was impossible to make out what.

"Your name?" repeated Monsieur Ménard, forcing himself to remain calm.

"..."

With the utmost care, and I really mean with the utmost care, Monsieur Ménard took hold of the pipe and removed it from the other's mouth, saying:

"Allow me!"

The stranger announced quite distinctly:

"Hulot."

Then, impassively, he replaced his pipe, gathered up his cases and the rest of his tackle—shrimp-nets, a tennis racket, fish-baskets, fishing-rods and a quantity of spare reels. It was obvious that this Hulot, whom I had never seen here before, was determined to get the best out of his holidays. He wasn't going to listen to any nonsense. The equipment he was trailing about with him made it quite clear that he had no intention of merely lazing about. Most certainly not!

Poor chap! If he had had the least idea . . .

The tip of one of his fishing-rods, which was pointing in front of him like a lance, caught in the floor, stuck there, bent double, freed itself suddenly, and cracked across the back of our intellectual who gave a little cry.

Hulot continued on his way, arousing, as he did so, sentiments of vague uneasiness or silent anger, and, although the guests were endeavouring to give the impression of not having noticed him, of keeping quite calm, I caught a number of quick glances expressing either curiosity or deep suspicion.

Who was this upstart—this intruder? By what right had he left the door open for nearly a whole minute?

Now he was advancing towards the staircase with great rhythmic strides, his long body bent forward from the hips. At every third pace he put down his packages to raise his hat to one or other of the ladies.

Then off he set again.

And this very afternoon he had been stroking the head of a dog on the road!

The waiter twisted the corner of his napkin into a corkscrew and set about trying to remove the speck of dust from the Colonel's sabotaged eye.

"Damned fool . . . Clumsy idiot . . ." fumed the officer.

The clumsy idiot, that is to say Hulot, had now reached the foot of the staircase and was starting to scale it gallantly, like a robot on springs. He did not

walk as you or I walk. Monsieur Ménard, chewing I know not what, watched him thoughtfully from the cash desk. The dirty water he had recently upset was still spreading a stain over the green and white tiled floor.

As for me, it was with considerable feeling that I watched this person who, one sensed, would go to any lengths to enjoy himself. I knew the precise thought that was in the mind of each of his victims—the Colonel rubbing his eyelid, the stricken philosopher, the Colonel's wife blushing furiously and wiping her guest's trousers with her handkerchief, Monsieur Smutte sliding on hands and knees under the furniture in search of his scattered credentials, Monsieur Ménard brooding, the waiter vainly looking for his slippers.

All of them were thinking: 'This man is dangerous.'

Perhaps they were right. Who knows?

Peace returned. Relieved of the mote in his eye, the Colonel resumed his military monologue. Monsieur Ménard stared at the clock.

The radio announced nasally:

"We now invite you to listen to a concert of light music presented by Fredo Gardner and his orchestra . . ."

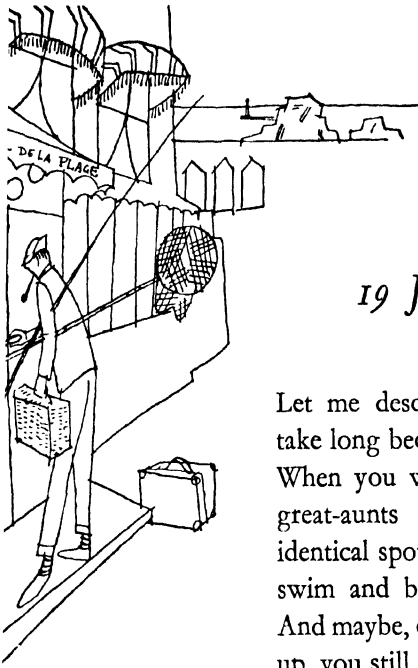
The dinner-gong gave the signal for a concerted rush to the dining-room.

"Come along," cried my wife, dashing to the front.

As I followed her, I thought of Hulot.

And as I write these lines, I am still thinking of him,

of that loose-limbed jack-in-the-box so supremely unconscious of our presence, that courteous, robot-like man weighed down with paraphernalia whom Fate had set in our midst for three whole weeks. He had entered the very citadel of our boredom with the irresistible force of a tornado.



19 July

Let me describe the beach. It won't take long because you know it already. When you were a child, one of your great-aunts dragged you off to an identical spot. It's where you learnt to swim and built your first sandcastles. And maybe, even though you've grown up, you still go back there.

Our little town is on the edge of a narrow gulf, one of those gulfs between Saint-Nazaire and Lorient which are not marked on the map. To the south of the gulf is a dejected heap of black rocks which look vaguely picturesque and in consequence help to subsidise the local postcard industry. Visitors frequently photograph them. On Sundays they sometimes even paint them.

To the north is the jetty, a sort of mast-head projecting into the sea and studded with mussels. Near the jetty is a channel which harbours the fishing fleet and smells of the sea. It gets dragged every year. Somewhere or other it disappears into the ground. No one

knows exactly where it goes or where it comes from. An empty yacht with washing drying on deck sometimes anchors there.

At the bottom of the gulf, sheltered by sand dunes, is our resort. There's no casino. But there is a cinema which shows twenty-year-old films on Saturday evenings. In addition, there's running water, a few modern houses, a tourist information bureau, a miniature golf course and the Beach Hotel, a bleak, silent building which could equally well be a bank or a garage.

In front of the hotel stretches the private beach. It is one of the amenities which goes with it. Covered with fallen branches and the remains of dead shellfish, it is described by Monsieur Ménard in his prospectus as "one of the loveliest beaches on the whole coast". A few parasols and half a dozen balloons complete our static universe.

These are our territorial limits. The country inland holds no more attraction for us than the high seas. From time to time we hear that the fishermen have located a shoal of tunny fish and this makes us feel very proud of our fishermen. Then for three days Monsieur Ménard serves up tunny fish with a different sauce at every meal.

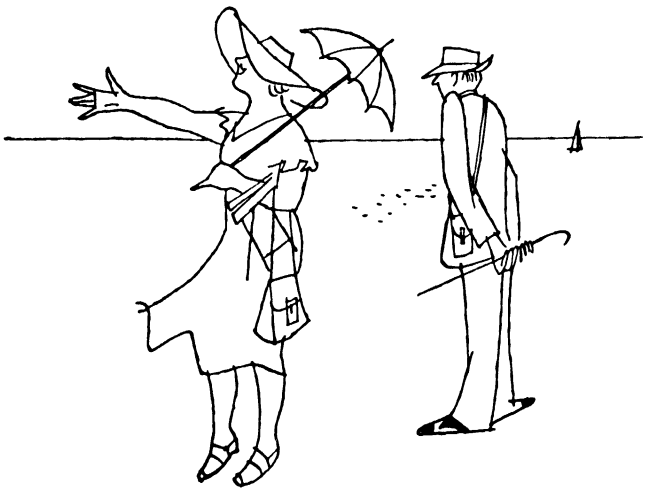
Isolated from the rest of the world on our little isthmus (that is to say the beach and the near-by houses) we do not budge. We know vaguely that there are some white cliffs to the north because some of us occasionally make excursions there.

I pass across this *décor* daily at the same time and at the same place. My wife, wearing her favourite holiday dress (blue flowers on a white background) and a straw hat with a dangling ribbon, walks ahead of me. She keeps one hand clamped on her head.

Why does she do this? Is it to keep her hat in place? Or is it to help her concentrate on the walk? When we reach the red and white beacon at the end of the jetty she points at the horizon and says:

"There's a boat . . . Oh, and there's another."

From then on, her hand rarely stops pointing. She is perfectly happy. Whenever she gives me the signal, I take a snap with the Kodak. Soon, like all the others, it will be ranged chronologically in the album.



"Well, I never, two boats more than last year," my wife will say.

The amateur fishermen file past us with wicker baskets, bamboo rods and all the rest of their paraphernalia. Once or twice a day one of them catches a tiny mullet. It's quite an event. Everyone is astonished, a few are envious. The hero, overcome by his achievement, smiles and blushes. He slips his catch into one of his mysterious little baskets and then, with the minimum delay, resumes his imitation of a pillar of salt.

Paralysed yogis, incorrigible dreamers, draped from head to foot in polished oilskins. Whether there's a gale or a sandstorm, there they are—surrounded by their little baskets and squinting at their dancing corks. Perhaps their great boots, like those in the fairy tale, carry them, in their dreams, to the distant shores of magic fishing grounds.

"What patience!" exclaims my wife.

We set off back to the hotel. I go at my own speed (I like to keep roughly three yards behind my wife). All the way down the jetty we meet and nod to other hotel guests who are also out for a stroll.

"Oh! If only the wind would drop," my wife remarks to each of them.

Generally speaking, no one complains overmuch about the weather. There are mists and showers, and the sky is frequently overcast, but the sun usually breaks through at least twice a week. It's always close,

cooling off, but slowly, from six o'clock onwards. Unluckily for us, there is the wind. It blows in from the sea, filling our eyes and pockets with sand, turning our parasols inside out and covering the beach with salt spray. Certain celestial signs sometimes lead my wife to predict that the wind is about to drop. But if it does, it's never for long. Monsieur Ménard never fails to explain to us how lucky we are, for all the way down the coast it's raining cats and dogs.

We reach the black rocks on the far side of the beach. My wife, her frock tucked above her knees, bends double at every fourth step and cries:

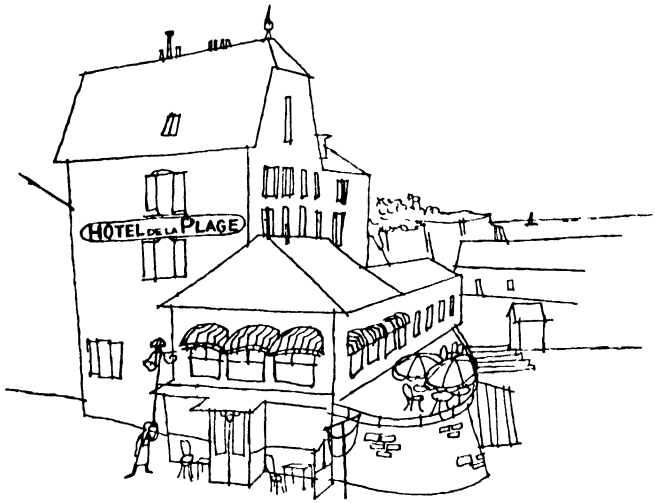
"Oh! What a pretty shell! Just look!"

She picks it up and hands it me. I listen briefly to the sound of the sea (why, when the real sea is so close?), then toss it back in the water.

It's really not very surprising that one finds shells on the shore. If only one day I could find a washed-up bottle with a message from a shipwrecked mariner.

Silent and competitive shrimp-fishers, wearing special shoes, splash about in grey pools, wretched scavengers of the low tides, frightened out of their wits if so much as a strip of seaweed winds round their ankles. For hours on end they poke their nets in and out of the secret recesses of the rocks, and since they lack the face to bring their meagre catch to the table, they end up by throwing it all back into the sea.

Shrimp-fishing is a serious pastime and inspires the wildest passions. It is a sport which equally develops



the body and strengthens the character. Essential requirements are the courage to stand up to a crab, the eyesight of a hawk, the quick reflexes of a beetle-hunter, a sense of magnanimity and high endeavour, humility, etc. Some shrimp-fishers lacking in self-control cannot suppress sudden displays of spite and malice, but these, for the most part, are beginners. I do not doubt that shrimp-fishing, practised assiduously over a period of thirty years, must end by soothing the nervous system.

When the fishermen begin to pack up we hasten back to the hotel.

"Hurry, dear, we're late," says my wife.

"No, we're not."

"Yes, we are."

The gong goes three minutes after we get back. We sit down to table. And as soon as it is afternoon, we begin all over again.

Sometimes in the evening, after dinner, we set off once more. My wife puts on her woollen bolero. I wind my scarf round my neck. In single file, and very slowly, we steal back to the usual places. But at this late hour, when everything is slightly mysterious and the wind has dropped and one can hear the sea at last, we never dare go near the black rocks where the shrimps are sleeping peacefully. A simple stroll up and down in front of the hotel, and we return to our room.

There are times when I compare myself to an invalid on the end of a leash. But I'm really more like some sort of plant, or a bit of storm-tossed driftwood. I don't do what I want to do, nor do I do what I don't want to do. I scarcely exist. I simply don't count.

And I know I couldn't get on without this beach or without these people who, although they bore me, are just like me. Nor could I manage without this sea for which I feel no affection and to which I would entrust nothing more than the tips of my toes in a heat-wave.

It's too late now for me ever to think of going anywhere else. Even so, I manage to enjoy certain aspects of my holiday. I like the sensation of being constantly on the watch, of keeping my eyes skinned for some astonishing event or astounding person.

Monsieur Hulot for example.

Ah! Let's say a few words about him.

He's just as odd as his car, and if someone doesn't apply the brakes he'll end up by taking us all for a ride. He still intrigues me. I can't decide whether or not I find him irritating.

Monsieur Ménard has put him right at the top of the hotel, and every morning his round face, smeared with shaving soap, is to be seen peering out of one of the attic windows. The water lacks the pressure to get that high, so he has to make do with an old-fashioned basin and jug. As soon as he has finished his morning ablutions, he conscientiously empties his bowl into the gutter under his window thereby causing an unexpected cataract in the street below.

First a whirlwind, then a drain-pipe vomiting water under a dry sky: that just about sums up Monsieur Hulot.

In every other respect he is painstakingly polite. He goes to great lengths to get to know us, even puts himself out on our behalf, and never thrusts himself forward. But although his one ambition is to become a member of our circle, we give him a wide berth. Frankly, he makes us nervous.

His behaviour is really extraordinary.

Yesterday morning, for instance.

It was a perfectly ordinary morning. The weather looked uncertain, the barometer was at *change* and grey clouds were massing under a stiff sea-breeze. Seaweed, abandoned by the high tide, strewed the beach with

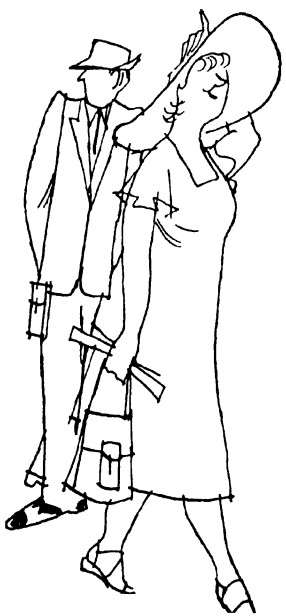
black ribbons. Parasols, looking like striped mushrooms, opened one after the other. The canvas of the tents heaved and swelled. Bare-legged, shoeless women, seated on deck-chairs, were knitting ferociously.

"How's the pullover?"

"I've nearly done the front. Look where I've got to . . ."

The moment a ray of sun penetrated the clouds, all the recumbent sun-worshippers stripped off their cotton vests. Looking as resigned as St. Lawrence on his grill and, like him, turning over from time to time, they lay stretched out, their eyes closed. Three or four courageous swimmers battled with the waves.

"The air's got an edge to it," said my wife, who was walking ahead of me.



"Very true, dear."

This idea of there being an edge to the air always amuses me. I like to think of the air having a middle and an edge.

A boy called Dennis was amusing himself (when there was enough sun) by taking out his magnifying glass and focusing it on the canvas of the tents or the stomachs of the sun-worshippers (who would leap up as if they'd been stung). A young man called Pierre, brown from head to

foot (how had he managed it?) was running lightly over the beach, throwing out his arms, raising his knees, breathing in, breathing out, one-two-three, one-two-three. Whatever the weather, he's at it from morning till night, passing between the groups with little leaps. Stretch, bend, double mark time, one-two-three, one-two-three.

Pierre is an athlete.

However, despite his air of dedication, I don't think he has failed to register the presence of Martine. He puffs out his chest, arches his back, draws in his stomach whenever he passes her, or under her window.

But all that comes from the half-opened window is a

light refrain which enquires insistently what the weather is like in Paris. Martine is listening to her record. Perhaps she raises a corner of her curtain and shoots a glance at this young peacock so eagerly spreading out his tail. Perhaps . . .

Monsieur Smutte, newly shaved, his skin sticky with sun-tan lotion (the optimist . . .), his socks and hat dazzling white, emerged with his wife and Regis his son. In his hand was a copy of a financial paper. He selected his site, stuck his parasol in the ground, unfolded a *chaise longue* and, after an anxious glance skywards, stretched himself out.

But at once, from the direction of the hotel, a cry resounded:

"Monsieur Smutte! Te . . . Telephone!"

The *chaise longue* creaked. The Belgian leapt up and rushed headlong towards the hotel. Ah! Business, business . . .

Our daily routine. A grey sea. A few people setting out nervously in boats. Some shrimp-fishers hugging the rocks. Hands crossed behind my back on my stick, my camera swinging against my hips, I ambled silently in the wake of my wife. For the first few days I average five to six snaps. From then on the figure diminishes. There's nothing left to take. During the last week I leave my camera in the hotel.

Two men were busily repainting a fishing-boat which they had dragged up a wooden runway. One of them, Monsieur Fred (also staying at the hotel) is a little,

stumpy man in a striped jersey. Like everyone else, he wears the regulation beach shoes and cap (our uniform, so to speak).

The moment Monsieur Fred arrives at the seaside, he transforms himself into a sailor. He dresses like one, speaks like one, spits like one and, of course, goes out sailing. He sticks his pipe in the corner of his mouth with the true leer of the ancient mariner. It may not be exactly comfortable, but then who cares?

Monsieur Fred, paint-pot in one hand, brush in the other, was daubing energetically at the hull. The second painter was suspended from a plank attached to the side. He, also, was daubing away busily.

"Oh! Look at the lovely boat," said my wife. "It's like a bird without wings."

Suddenly, just as we were approaching the slipway, I saw the boat shift and start to slide. At the same time the hand-winch to which it was attached, began spinning like a Catherine wheel. Monsieur Fred, startled out of his wits, watched as the boat, *his* boat, shuddered, then tore down the slide. It sent up a sheet of spray as it struck the water. Monsieur Fred could not grasp what had happened. The second painter, all unsuspecting, suddenly found himself with his feet in the water, shouting for help.

The launching was complete. All that was lacking was a bottle of cham-

pagne across the bows, and a few well-chosen words from the wife of a local dignitary.

As you may imagine, the boat would now have to be repainted from stern to prow.

A cry of stupefaction spread across the beach. Some of the hotel guests had actually seen the whole thing. Those who hadn't were quickly acquainted with the details. A major disaster couldn't have caused more excitement.

Someone had deliberately freed the windlass which was holding the boat.

But who on earth would have dared?

'Some damned kid,' I thought. 'Dennis, most likely.'

Dennis, the young ragamuffin with the magnifying glass, was perfectly capable of having detached the cable. Moreover, I had seen him lurking in the vicinity a few moments earlier.

Glancing round for Dennis my gaze fell on Monsieur Hulot. Monsieur Fred was also looking in the same direction.

Monsieur Hulot, towel in hand, was leaning up against a stake in the ground. He had just had a bathe, his skin was still wet and covered with goose pimples. Like everyone else, he was watching the boat, which was now drifting out to sea. At the same time he was shooting uneasy glances at the unwound windlass, at the stupefied holiday-makers and at Monsieur Fred (who was only controlling himself by compulsively

stirring his brush round and round the paint-pot).

Their eyes met. The painter began to suspect Monsieur Hulot. Hulot tended to attract suspicions.

Perhaps, after all, he had engineered the whole thing. What did we know about this obsequious madman? Might not his good manners, his excessively good manners, turn out to be merely the façade of a practical joker?

Suddenly, I don't know why, I felt reassured. If Monsieur Hulot had released the windlass, it was by accident. Why was I so sure of this? I can't say. Nevertheless, I was sure.

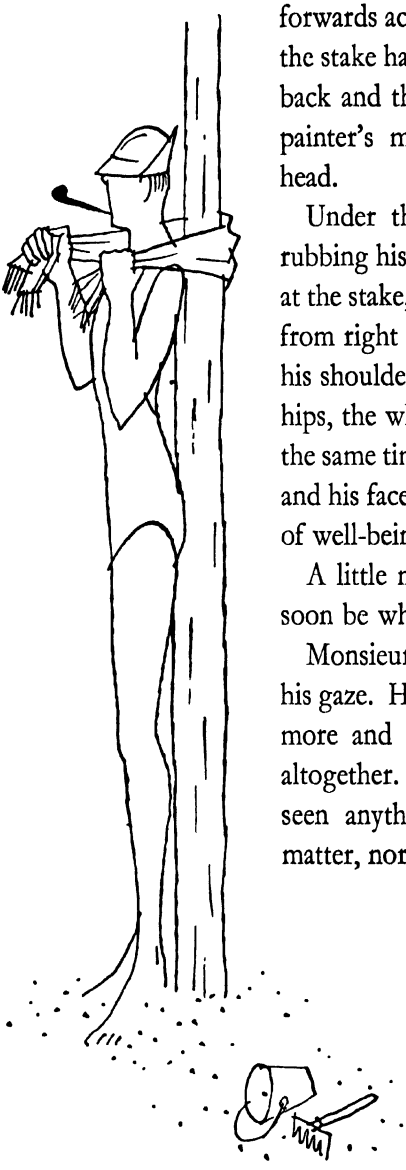
I stopped. My wife, addressing her eulogies to the empty air, walked on. You may have remarked how she is only interested in the most trivial details. More important events pass her by. She never even registers them. The launching of the boat, for example, had completely escaped her notice.

Thoughtfully, with furrowed brow and twisted mouth, Monsieur Fred was still staring at Hulot. The latter, troubled by this dark and accusing eye, seized a corner of his towel in each hand. He was going to dry his back not only because it was wet but also, I suspected, to give the impression of being entirely at his ease.

Monsieur Fred did not take his eyes off him.

We were then treated to a very curious little pantomime.

Hulot began to draw the towel backwards and



forwards across his back. But unluckily the stake had somehow got between his back and the towel. Distracted by the painter's menacing glare, he lost his head.

Under the impression that he was rubbing his back, he rubbed vigorously at the stake, first from left to right, then from right to left, covering the area of his shoulders, the small of his back, his hips, the whole length of his body. At the same time he flexed his knees lightly and his face began to shine with a sense of well-being.

A little more and one felt he would soon be whistling.

Monsieur Fred could not withdraw his gaze. He stirred his brush in the pot more and more slowly, then stopped altogether. It was clear he had never seen anything like it. And for that matter, nor had I. In front of us a man was concentrating the full force of his vital energy on polishing a single, isolated stake.

A madman? Not a bit of it.

It was obvious that

Monsieur Fred did not doubt for a moment that Hulot was the culprit. His behaviour in itself betrayed him: it was the performance of a child who quickly changes the topic of conversation in order to distract attention from what he's been getting up to.

The second painter climbed out of the sea. Trailing water, he rejoined Monsieur Fred. Without saying a word, the latter indicated the dumb show which was being enacted before us. Panic-stricken at these two pairs of piercing eyes, Hulot redoubled his efforts. The towel was polishing the stake with dazzling rapidity.

"Cooee! What are you doing, dear?" cried my wife. She had got some way ahead.

"I'm coming, I'm coming."

I didn't want to go, but I had to. I'm not the sort of man who has to be called twice.

As I moved reluctantly off, Pierre, our young athlete, trotted past. One-two-three, one-two-three. Like my wife, he had noticed nothing, being as usual entirely preoccupied with strengthening his calves, loosening his ankles, relaxing his arms, and maintaining the regularity of his breathing.

As Pierre passed the stake, Hulot, seizing his chance, tucked his elbows into his sides, distended his nostrils and, raising his knees high in the air, set off in his wake.

But he didn't go very far. At the first row of cabins I saw him branch off to the right, weave nimbly in and out between the parasols, then, raising a small cloud of dust, take to his heels in the opposite direction.

His flight could hardly be claimed to have strengthened his case.

But that's how he is. A timid and inoffensive sort of devil. It being nearly lunch-time, the beach began to empty as quickly as if someone had just sighted a tidal wave. Only a group of young bathers still lingered in the vicinity of Martine, who was cautiously dipping her toes in the sea. Pierre was also near-by, hands on hips, bending and stretching his knees. Monsieur Fred and his crony were scanning the beach for Hulot the master saboteur, who had just disappeared at a gallop behind the bathing huts.

Two elderly ladies wearing straw hats were dragging their deck-chairs in the direction of the road. Each carried a basket in her left hand. Between sewing sets and spectacle cases protruded the neck of a half-empty lemonade bottle.

Their feet were bare. Oh, what fun to feel the warm sand beneath one's feet as in the years gone by . . .

My eyes lingered briefly on Martine's shapely body. No good—she obviously didn't intend to go in the water.

"What's the matter now?" demanded my wife, who had got a few yards ahead.

"Nothing, my dear. I was only watching the seagulls."

"Seagulls. I can't see any seagulls."

Taken aback, I turned my head. Not a bird in sight.

"I think . . . I think they must have all flown away."

"Oh, I see," said my wife setting off once more in the direction of the hotel.

We sat down in the dining-room. Three minutes later the gong went. In front of me was my phial of drops and our bottle of red wine, which we make last a full week. Our napkins were tied round the neck of the bottle.

The holiday meal routine. The guests enter the dining-room in Indian file. They take their places with a series of little nods, bows, smiles, greetings and affable enquiries.

"Was the water warm?"

"A bit on the chilly side."

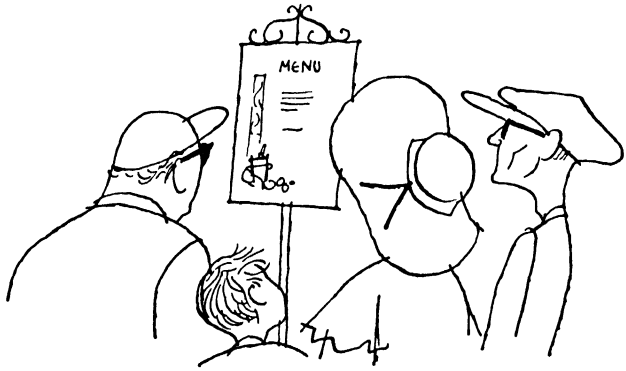
"And then that freezing wind . . ."

"One doesn't feel the cold when one's in the water, it's when one gets out . . ."

"I could eat a horse . . ."

"What's on the menu?"

Frocks crumpled by the wind and stained with sand, creaking shoes and dented hats. The avaricious expression on Monsieur Ménard's face as he sits behind his cash-desk. He knows how hungry we are and curses the sea air which is at the bottom of it all. He writes furtively in a little note-book. He is always writing furtively in a little note-book.



The Colonel stands in the 'on-guard' position beside his chair. Monsieur Smutte checks a final account. A fairly young and fairly attractive woman powders her cheeks winsomely in front of a Brazilian. Everything she does is desperately affected. The Brazilian is mad about her, but he simply hasn't a chance. A Brazilian! What a small world it is!

Our young intellectual, lost in a book, gropes unsuccessfully for the back of his chair. The children squeal and scrape their knives across their plates (the one sound I can't stand). Sand gets trodden into the floor. Sighs of tiredness and hunger. The creaking of chairs and tables and the crash of crockery. From the pantry comes the rumbling of the taps and the musty smell of the frying fish. And the glass door which connects with the kitchen swings backwards and forwards half a dozen times whenever the waiter or

Monsieur Ménard passes through it. It doesn't exactly squeak. A drop of oil would be quite enough to put it right.

No. The truth is that the door is complaining. Neither open nor shut, as a door ought to be, it is lamenting the uncertainty of its situation.

In our ambiguous and displaced little world, in which no one is ever quite at ease, Monsieur Hulot is incapable of staying still a moment. He pulls chairs aside, smiles, nods, bows and lets everyone go ahead of him. And in trying to imitate all our little gestures, he succeeds in making a complete mockery of them.

He is the last to sit down. His table is next to the swing door, and he shares it with a man who never speaks.

The meal starts with the arrival of the *hors d'œuvre*—tomato sprinkled with parsley. Little cries of relief and anticipation. Napkins unfold like artificial chrysalises. The waiter comes and goes as though walking in his sleep. The tinkling of glasses and plates. The voice of the Colonel who, as usual, is holding forth; but he keeps the pitch down, for he regards meals as the equivalent of private staff conferences. Soft music, preceding the news, floats from the wireless. And the inevitable:

"Monsieur Smutte! Te . . . Telephone!"

A whiting appears, garnished with two slices of lemon. Then veal escalopes with a cheese sauce, which

will go straight to my liver. I quickly order a bottle of Vichy water.

The two painters enter the dining-room. They are very late. One of them has changed his trousers.

Immediately Hulot stares at his plate. The two painters have seen him. This is clear from the tilt of their chins and the way they keep their eyes fixed on him as they tiptoe to their table. Hulot, caught off his guard, attempts to distract attention by grabbing at

the salt-cellar, then at the mustard-pot. This greatly upsets his neighbour, for each time Hulot's sleeve brushes against the former's lips.

The two painters, still gazing at Hulot, begin their *hors d'œuvre*.

The meal is a sort of truce. For a whole hour there is not a cat in the streets, not a shadow on the deserted beach which now rings with cries from the open dining-room windows:

"And one whiting!"

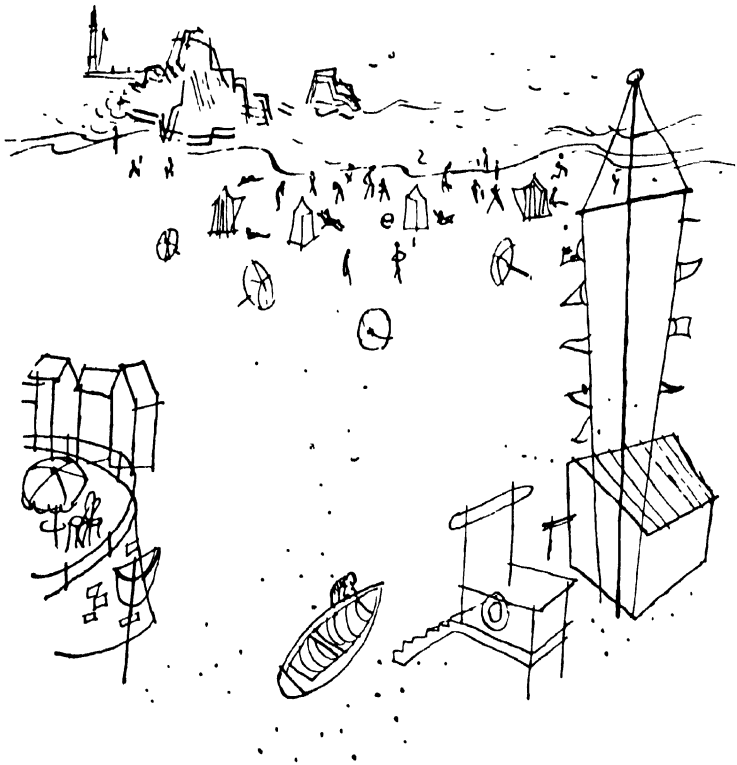
"Right you are!"

"And one escalope!"

"Coming up!"

We eat. We drink. If absolutely necessary, we talk. And the hotel food, as we frequently remark to each other, is just what we have at home. Why bother to have anything different?

Pulling aside the curtain on the window, I see the old man who looks after the ice-cream stall. He is happiest at meal-times, when the beach is deserted. He takes the bottle of wine which he has been keeping on ice in the bowels of his stall and, in the shade of his parasol, starts to eat and drink.



22 July

However hard we try not to let it happen, Hulot really gets under our skin. He's up to everything. He makes one gaffe after another. Yesterday he said "*Bonjour, monsieur*", to Madame Fred and raised her husband's hand to his lips. Today he is standing, trembling with excitement, in front of the hotel entrance, watching the long twist of candy-floss which hangs from the side of the ice-cream seller's cart. The candy-floss stretches and stretches. Hulot leans forward. His calves quiver. He almost topples over. Is the candy-floss going to drop? It stretches still further, nearly touches the ground. Another half inch or so... Hulot can bear it no longer. He leaps forward . . . the very second the ice-cream merchant retrieves it with a dexterous flick of the wrist.

Then it begins all over again. And it can go on indefinitely.

Threatened candy-floss forever redeemed in the nick of time. The thought of it never fails to bring back the memory of those days by the sea.

Having come with the idea of an active holiday,

Hulot has tried his hand at everything. Swimming, tennis (at which it appears he made a complete fool of himself), fishing and boating. The people whom he mimics claim he's an eccentric, an exhibitionist, a madman . . . At least they admit that he keeps one from getting bored.

Our peaceful streets empty at the deafening approach of his crazy car.

Hulot shocks us as would a mysterious foreigner completely ignorant of our ways, or rather a visitor from outer space. We can't see things through his eyes. And Hulot, despite his efforts, can't see things through ours. Only the children like him. Young Smutte, a little fair boy, is one.

In addition to the children, there's a jolly, middle-aged Englishwoman who's always looking for him. Her main interests are sporting, and she wears a white skirt and a cap pulled over one eye.

But if Monsieur Hulot is impervious to our animosity, he is no less impervious to friendly advances. He is isolated, untouchable. No matter how hard the Englishwoman tries, she will never succeed in attracting his absent-minded glance, in smoothing the wrinkles from his brow or in getting his pipe to swivel in her direction.

When a guest hangs up his hat in the hall, Hulot, taking the gesture for a salutation, whips off his own. When a garrulous fisherman, a regular old man of the

sea, boasts about the size of his catch, Hulot listens, nodding his head. It never for a moment occurs to him to glance inside the fishing-basket where two dwarf carp are still expiring. When a woman smiles at him in the passage (the coquettish woman who smiles at everyone) Hulot smiles back, freezing his smile until he reaches a mirror so that he can judge its effect. As he examines his reflection, his mouth twists in all directions and his smile degenerates into a childish grimace. The waiter, fascinated by this exhibition, also smiles and grimaces. Before he knows where he is he finds himself imitating Hulot's gestures. The latter goes off. The waiter, forgetting that he is holding a glass of beer in his hand, glances at his wrist-watch, and the beer spills down the neck of the Brazilian who happens to be sitting close by.

Hulot's fault again! Hulot the scourge, Hulot the plague of the Beach Hotel!

But let's be honest about it. What really disconcerts us is this. Beneath all his courtesy and politeness (he raises his hat at least a hundred times a day), we detect a complete and unassailable independence. It shines through the least of his gestures. And we wonder whether, after all, he may not really be making fun of us.

Nevertheless, despite his unprecedented natural clumsiness, how he loves helping people!

For example, Martine's aunt arrived yesterday afternoon. She's very *comme il faut*, with short, grey hair

always immaculately tidy. Hulot happened to be there when she got off the bus.

A little gesture with his hat and he had hurled himself on her cases, piled them on top of each other, lifted them in his arms and started to climb the steps.

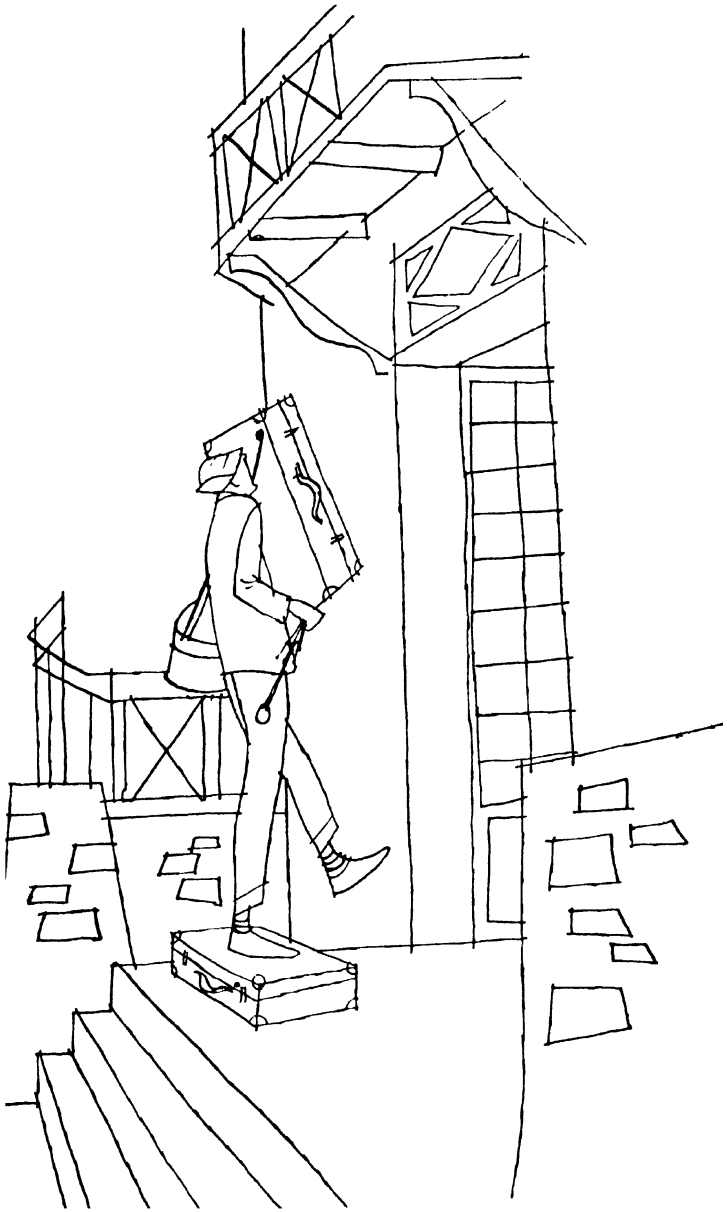
"Oh, Martine, what a journey it was!" said Martine's aunt. "Half an hour's wait at Laval, no restaurant car, people treading on your toes in the corridors and not a breath of air. And impossible, of course, to get so much as a glass of water. . . ."

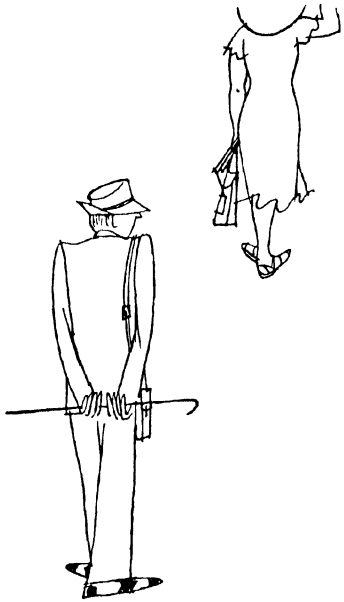
Meanwhile Hulot had reached the top step. But blinded by his load, he failed to notice a small case just in front of him, stepped on it, staggered, lost his balance and, trying to regain it, ran clean through the house, across the garden and over the flower-beds . . . Still running, still carrying the piled-up suitcases, he reappeared round a corner, breathlessly proffering his apologies. Martine's aunt, who was getting anxious about the fate of her luggage, looked relieved.

"Most kind of you, monsieur. Thank you very much."

Hulot made a few ceremonious movements with his foot, and, attempting to kiss her hand, tickled her nose with a long bramble which had got attached to his back.

After a final lift of his hat, Hulot leapt into his car and set off with a roar. By that I mean that the engine, rudely coaxed, coughed, that the exhaust exploded, that the hood quivered and that a sympathetic passer-by had to give the vehicle a push.





Half an hour later my wife and I again passed in front of the villa. With its two floors, its cross-beams and its innumerable chimney-stacks it looks like an Alpine châlet which has taken the wrong turning. The two women were standing side by side on the balcony. The elder had threaded her arm through that of the younger; probably in the hope that someone might say:

"Your niece! I don't believe it. Surely your sister!"

A young man rode by on a bicycle. On catching sight of Martine, he let go the handle-bars and started to whistle . . . A very brief and simulated indifference to danger! Another thirty yards and his hands were back on the handle-bars and he had stopped whistling: Martine was too far away either to see or to hear.

She was pointing out to sea.

"On a clear day, you can see Saint-Nazaire."

Martine's aunt shaded her eyes with her hand. Unluckily the horizon was shrouded in mist. Impossible to catch a glimpse of Saint-Nazaire.

Not that it remotely mattered.

"How amazing!" cried Martine's aunt. "What a wonderful view!"

"They light the beacon at half-past six. At night it looks so pretty as it flashes on and off. The coast is meant to be quite dangerous round here."

"And all those gaily-coloured parasols. How gay and lively it all looks . . ."

"Particularly when the sun's out."

"Yes, I'm sure . . ."

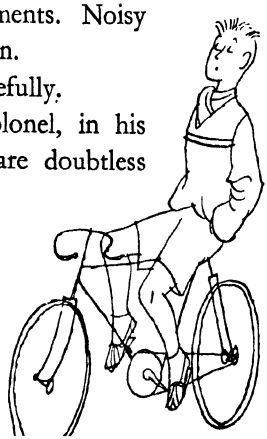
Down on the beach, Pierre was surpassing himself. Hand-stands, trunk turning and twisting and goodness knows what, and all the time shooting glances at the balcony of the villa.

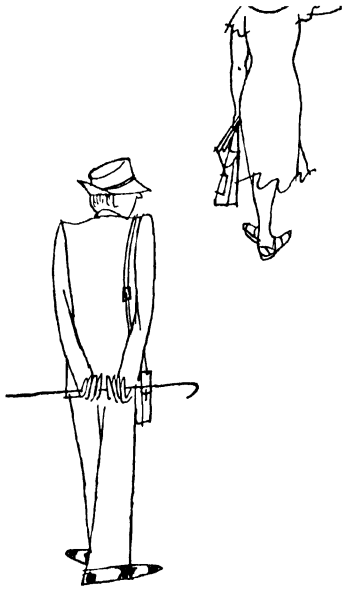
Did Martine notice him?

That's how, year in year out, our little idylls, dramas and farces get under way. All these people, despite their promises to 'see each other in Paris' only come together on holiday. They meet, they separate. Ties of love and friendship are formed and severed—but easily, dispassionately, in the true, drowsy spirit of long days by the side of the sea. On holiday, at least in our part of the world, there are no elopements. Noisy quarrels are rare and no skulls get broken.

Everything glides by quietly and peacefully.

Holidays don't change us. The Colonel, in his suburban home (the walls of which are doubtless plastered with maps) carries on much as he does here, boring his neighbours to distraction with his eternal military





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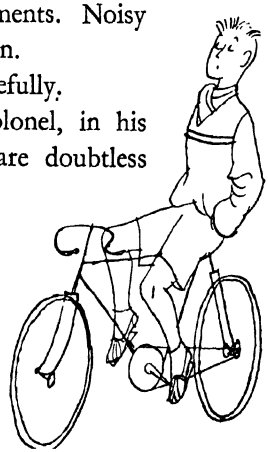


discourses. And Monsieur Smutte . . . One can see him plainly enough behind a shiny desk in his Brussels flat, with a secretary announcing every other minute:

"Monsieur Smutte. Telephone."

I hope his secretary has been blessed with a nimbler tongue than our waiter.

Our quirks and mannerisms follow us wherever we go, on the beach or in the hotel.

Except in the case of Hulot . . .

He's rather like a mouse in a beehive. One simply can't classify him. He could equally well be a prominent banker or a hairdresser's apprentice. And when he's on holiday, he's on holiday, and that's all there is to it!

But with those long legs and round eyes of his which seem to examine everything and observe nothing, he's probably on holiday wherever he finds himself.

Yesterday evening he was at it again.

Do you like communal evenings in hotel lounges? Icy rain pelts down on the sea and the wind rattles the shutters. No one dares think of opening the door. We wrap ourselves up, herd together like animals trying to keep themselves warm. It is at such moments that we ask ourselves what exactly we're doing marooned in this stranded hulk by the sea.

Everyone is in the same room. The Brazilian and a couple of supernumeraries are playing bridge with the coquette (just how far does she go? I haven't the least idea), who is chewing her ivory cigarette-holder. This

young charmer would like the Beach Hotel to be one of those smart places where you find at least two novelists, an Arabian prince and a handful of film stars with whom one would be at perfect liberty to confuse her.

Alas, for the moment there's no alternative but to play bridge with a Brazilian.

"One heart, two no-trumps, I pass..." Whispered bidding. Silent hostility. Interminable speculation before an unexpected seven of clubs. Should I attempt a finesse? The Brazilian taps his slender fingers on the table. A finesse: now that really is something, isn't it? The coquette spreads her cards into a fan and brushes them nervously against her cheek.

At a near-by table a lonely old woman never stops stirring her cup of herbal tea. Monsieur Smutte glances through some green dossiers. The intellectual smokes his pipe and reads. My wife knits. No one moves. Sometimes the heating gets turned on, but never for longer than half an hour. The waiter, napkin on shoulder, sulks in a corner. He is waiting for us to go to bed. On the radio there's a tragedy, *Hector Betrayed.*

What a gay evening we're having . . .

"Whose deal?"

A distant salvo brings the first act of *Hector Betrayed* to an end.

". . . in a word," says the Colonel, "I was one of the first to advocate the suppression of puttees. The foot-

soldier has the same rights as the artillery man. Yet one gets leggings while the other is trussed up like a sausage . . ."

The second act of *Hector Betrayed* gets under way. We are in Troy and the situation is critical. The Greeks have arrived. What barbarians! The struggle warms up. Who's going to win?

"One diamond . . ."

"Good . . ."

It was half-past nine. The Englishwoman, wearing white tennis socks, came into the hall. She was looking for someone to talk to, some distraction.

But we had nothing to offer. The card players, their attention fixed on dummy, did not so much as look up. Monsieur Ménard, his elbows on the counter, yawned. The Englishwoman gave a pout which showed just what she thought of us and left the room. A freezing draught whistled about our legs.

"Two diamonds," said the Brazilian, replying to a call.

"That's our trick," smiled the coquette.

The smile froze on her lips. As the Englishwoman was closing the door, a sudden hubbub broke out. It was coming from behind the closed door of a small lounge. It resembled music. And what music! Imagine a crash of cymbals in a cemetery at midnight. A hoarse

trumpet, cries, a demented clarinet. What, I believe, is known as 'jive'.

And at full blast.

The semicircle listening breathlessly to the play gave a start and stood up. The intellectual shuddered. Monsieur Smutte stared over the rims of his glasses in the direction of the lounge. The old lady spilt a few drops of her herbal tea, by now completely cold. The Englishwoman came back into the room. With a radiant expression on her face, she performed a few steps of a dance called, I think, the 'jitterbug'.

The music swam round us deafeningly.

As though they were setting off to the assault of an impregnable position, several guests, the Colonel in their midst, advanced on the door of the lounge. On the Colonel's rapped-out word of command, they pushed open the door. Hulot, pipe between teeth, was sitting imperturbably beside a gramophone which was bellowing out his favourite record.

Jazz! Music of the jungle!

The Colonel, realising that there was no danger, had pushed to the front. With a brisk movement of his stick he turned off the switch, plunging the room into darkness and cutting off the gramophone motor. The music slowed down, groaned and stopped.

Calm was restored.

"Eh, eh! You saw that?" said the Colonel, sitting down next to me and crossing his legs. "I certainly

showed him where he got off. And I didn't waste any time about it either."

He was bursting to go on talking. I gave him his cue.

"I hear that on the tennis court . . ."

"Just what I was going to say. The man's a duffer, an out-and-out duffer. You weren't there? A pity . . . You'd have witnessed a sorry exhibition. I admit I'm not the player I was at twenty. But it's the way I place my shots that counts and, above all, my technique! And it's technique which counts, sir. The straightforward drive, the back-hand, the masked volley . . . Wham! Back and then wham again!"

He drove imaginary balls in all directions.

"Just imagine it, this fellow . . . What's his name? Ah, yes, Hulot. Well, he strutted about the court with his nose in the air as if he was going to tear the place apart. Pouf!" The Colonel gave a shrug of disdain. "It didn't take me long to call his bluff. I'm not as young as I was, but I'm still a man to be reckoned with. Don't forget I got into the finals of the military championship, fourth division. Indeed I did. Does that surprise you?"

"No, no . . ."

"So when I saw Monsieur . . . What did you say his name was? Ah, yes. When I saw Monsieur Hulot stalking on to the court like a ruddy champion I said under my breath, 'Now for it, my lad. We shall see what we shall see.' I kept a straight face, but I can tell you I was rearing to go. I took up my position . . . Wham! Wham! One ball, two balls. Fifteen-love. Thirty-love. Forty-love. Phut! First game. And I carried on just as I'd started. Ah! If you'd seen the beggar's face. He looked pretty small, believe me.

Soon he didn't know whether he was on his head or his heels. Absolutely baffled. I'm not one to boast, sir, but the only two balls he managed to return went outside the court. One of them . . . just listen to this, it's amazingly funny . . . one of them actually went over the wall into the curé's garden. And the curé was taking a little nap on a deck-chair, ha-ha!"

The Colonel unbuttoned his collar to prevent himself choking.

"Ah, ah, ah! Hulot ran into the garden to look for the ball, and, now listen carefully," the Colonel lowered his voice, "and, pushing open the gate set the bell ringing, you know, one of those little bells which choir-boys ring during the mass, ting-a-ling . . . ha! ha! Well . . ." He glanced from right to left and back again. No, no one was listening. "Well, the bell woke the curé. He must have thought he was in the middle of a service, habit you know, and the next thing we heard was a shaky voice singing out: *Oremus, domine* . . . Oh! Oh! Oh! Ssh! Not a word about this to anyone. Remember, I haven't told you anything."

Someone was approaching.

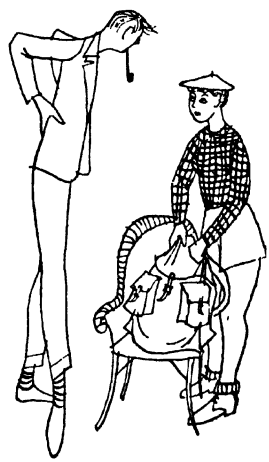
"As for Hulot, my dear sir," continued the Colonel very seriously, "don't tell me he came along for a lesson in how to play tennis. Not at all. It was written all over his face that he thought he was in for a complete walk-over! Well, it didn't take me long to put him right about that! Let him come back for another drubbing, if he dares!"

Beaten at tennis, humiliated at the gramophone, poor Hulot. For some time he wandered disconsolately about, body bent forward, arms rigid at his sides. Sloping but stiff, he seems perpetually to defy the laws of gravity.

"Acts speak louder than words," explained the philosopher to the Englishwoman. However, it is our own acts which ought to reflect our philosophy.

The coquette, pursing her lips, played a four of spades. For once she was too busy contriving the downfall of her opponent to be able to dazzle anyone with the prospect of her own.

Near the door a girl camper, who had just filled her thermos with coffee, was tightening the straps on a haversack larger than herself. A second lady appeared. No longer young, she had soldierly features, spectacles and the outline of a moustache. She took a whistle out of her pocket and blew it authoritatively. The girl camper struggled helplessly with her haversack. The gallant Hulot leapt forward. He seized hold of the haversack, raised it on to her shoulders and, as she left the hall, strode out after her.



No one made any comment.

Which is not the same as saying no one thought anything.

Later that night, between two and three in the morning, there was a terrific shindy. Naturally enough we

were all woken up. The bedroom lights went on one after the other. What was going on? Why the uproar? It was only Hulot returning from his little spree.

This morning the guests, scandalised and aggrieved, recounted strange happenings. It seems that Hulot had ended his evening under canvas. He had drunk, sung and, for all we knew, danced. He had uttered Indian war-cries, performed strange rites (this was Monsieur Fred's contribution) and, worn out and smelling strongly of liquor, had returned extremely late to the hotel.

But then you, like me, must form your own conclusions.

23 July

A week already. It's as if we'd only arrived yesterday. How time flies . . .

Despite the fact we're on holiday we all, sooner or later, get into a rhythm, a routine. After breakfast, my wife and I stroll down to the jetty. Martine, who is just getting up, opens her bedroom window and puts on a record. As usual, it's the holiday-makers' lament. It follows us wherever we go. I know it off by heart. Sometimes I find myself humming it.

Quel temps fait-il à Paris?

We never stop feeling nostalgic for Paris. The Colonel complains about the bearing of the Spahis on the fourteenth of July parade. Monsieur Fred tells us that a horrible crime has been committed close to where he lives. And, worst of all, we learn from the meteorological report on the wireless that it's sunny in Paris whereas here it never stops raining.

If it's not Paris, then it's some other town which is always in our thoughts. How is it getting on without us? What are all the people we know doing? Are they thinking of joining us?

The hotel guests await the arrival of the morning mail with the eagerness of soldiers in the trenches. Their morale rises when a card informs them that some cousins on holiday in the Auvergne are well, and drops when there's nothing for them. At midday a newsvendor blows his horn outside the hotel. It's the signal for a stampede. He is selling yesterday's Paris papers. How wonderful! The Paris daily papers! The edi-

torials, the gossip columns must be devoured to the last word. How could one survive without knowing what the papers have to say about it all?

"Read all about it! Read all about it!"

Another toot on his horn and the newsvendor goes on his way.

From her window, Martine surveys the beach, the passers-by, the philosopher who is setting out from the hotel with two books under his arm, Pierre who is practising hand-stands, the Colonel who is taking a stroll and saluting right and left. Old soldiers return his salute self-consciously.

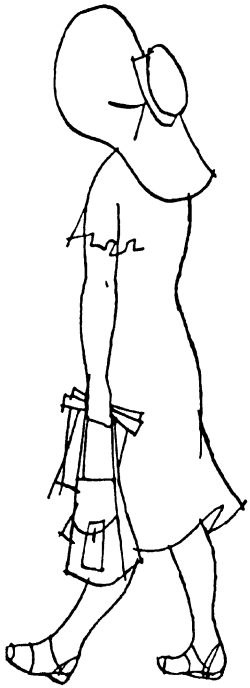
If, at that moment, I find myself under Martine's window, I raise my hat. She replies, when she notices me, with a quick nod. Sometimes her aunt, Madame Dubreuilh, is standing beside her on the first-floor balcony. The two women often admire the barely discernible, misty view, the long grey and white clouds, the occasional patches of sky. I hear Madame Dubreuilh murmur:

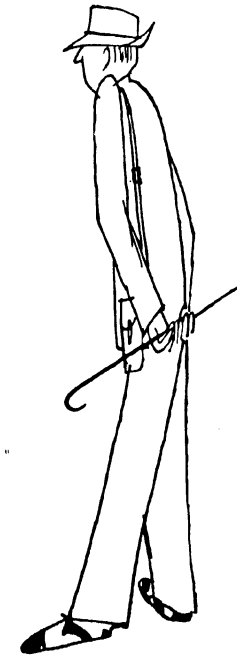
"The light's so subtle, so delicate . . ."

"Just like a Boudin sky," says Martine.

"Those black rocks clutching at the sea like claws. And down there, to the right, that chalky cliff with grass on top. Really very pretty. I do understand just why you love coming here . . ."

The young girl purses her lips indulgently.
"Yes," she says.
"And the wonderful sense of peace . . ."
I wander off. Streets, highways, pavements, roads,





embankments and stretches of sand pass beneath the soles of my shoes. I advance with short strides. I don't have to decide on where we're going, nor about the stops, short cuts and when to turn back. My wife takes care of all that. I simply follow. I keep my attention

fixed on the shop windows piled high with sun-hats, handbags, beach shoes, novelty ash-trays (made from brightly varnished sea-shells), all the usual tawdry, catch-penny, seaside bric-à-brac.

My wife continues on her way (which is also mine). My mind is a complete blank. I don't think of anything at all. I twiddle my stick behind my back. When we meet an acquaintance, I raise my hat. I toss empty shells back into the sea. I admire the same boats that my wife admires.

We vary our walks. That is to say that one day we work our way round from the rocks to the jetty, and the next day from the jetty to the rocks.

On really good days, when the sun is only lightly covered with clouds, we sometimes feel sufficiently daring to make an expedition to the strip of grass on top of the cliff.

When we get there we unfold our handkerchiefs and sit on them. My wife plays with her parasol and is overcome with astonishment at the sight of a grasshopper, a snail, or a cow chewing the cud.

"I hope these cliffs are solid."

"Well, really . . ."

"Oh, don't laugh! I've often heard about how the sea eats into the base of the cliff and then one fine day . . ."

"Yes, but that takes years."

"I don't care. Let's move away from the edge. Anyway, I've got one of my dizzy spells coming on."

We shift our handkerchiefs several yards inland and then sit down again. The roar of the sea fades. The trampled grass stains our shoes (mine are brown and white and pointed). We go into raptures over a landscape which could hardly be more mediocre.

For a good half-hour we gaze at the foam-capped waves (I love these original expressions), the seagulls nesting in crannies on the side of the cliff, which resounds with their cries, the broken coast-line curving in and disappearing towards the north-east, the photogenic ridge of dark rock, and the sails of distant boats —petals dropped on the shining sea which from this distance looks quite calm.

The cliff is sixty-six feet high.

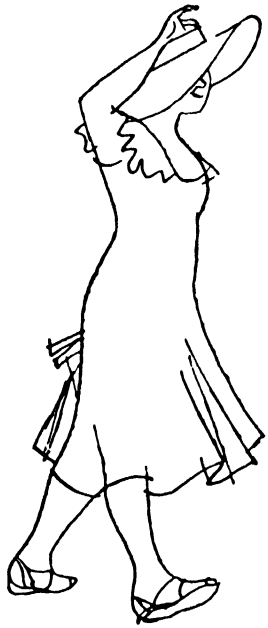
When we've had enough of the sunlight and the grasshoppers, when we've exhausted every possible topic of conversation, and even lavished our admiration on the hindquarters of an elderly, sleeping cow, then, and only then, we hasten back, staggering down the winding paths like invalids.

"Wait for me! Wait for me!" shouts my wife, who for once is in the rear.

Her ankles get covered with scratches. A strap on her sandal snaps. She limps along, her face getting redder and redder. But as soon as we reach the road, she moves on ahead, declaring several times:

"I'm tired. But it's a healthy tiredness."

It's not the last time I shall make an expedition to the cliff-top and hear about my wife's 'healthy



tiredness'. There will be many future occasions.

Unless, that is, between then and now, Monsieur Hulot inadvertently blows the little town to smithereens.

*

He's really capable of anything, that man. Wherever he goes he causes a commotion, and although officially I disapprove of him, I don't think I share the sentiments of repulsion he inspires in nearly everyone else. In fact, he's beginning to amuse me.

I even rather hope he'll keep it up.

But don't tell anyone.

Normally, you understand, we haven't many distractions. An hour or two a day is long enough to spend watching the cars go past. They all look the same and, despite official statistics, accidents don't happen all that frequently. The best place to go for that sort of thing would probably be a dangerous crossing on the main road. But that's a good distance away.

There's the beach of course, but that means the sand, the other guests, the wind, the children who never stop getting under one's feet. Sandcastles have never interested me, and it's a bit late to begin now. It's also a bit late to be staring at bathing belles (not that there are many of them). I don't water-ski and I don't row. As for fishing, I couldn't even hook a tiddler.

Well, then?

What is there left for me to do?

Walks, of course, gossip, other people's love affairs, Martine and her complement of wooers—which includes Pierre and, I suspect, the intellectual.

I admit I'm slightly intrigued by the life of the hotel, the pointless conversations, the feuds, the Brazilian's chattering *entourage*, the arrivals and departures. An English couple swelled our ranks this morning. Introductions. Handshakes. Gestures and comments exchanged on the weather. The relief when one learnt that it's been hailing in Cornwall!

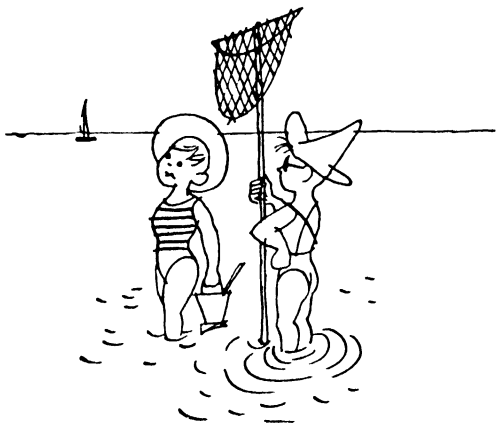
And that's all. The very thought of bathing makes me shiver with terror. I don't play golf, full-sized or miniature. I neither smoke nor drink (except for my medical drops). I have very few vices. Card games are outside my experience.

So thank God for Hulot.

*

This morning he suddenly decided to do some canoeing. After all, why shouldn't he?

We saw him leave the hotel in good time. He staggered down the hall under a load of paddles, a collapsible canoe, a little wooden seat and a paint-pot and brush (the canoe needed repainting), and went off in



the direction of the beach. From the distance the voice of the Englishwoman echoed:

"Mister Hulo-o-o-o!"

It was breath wasted. Hulot heard nothing. With resolute steps he was setting out to answer the call of adventure.

It still being early, the beach was relatively empty. A dozen assorted bathers were limbering up under the bored eye of a P.T. instructor. Nervous twitches, pockets of flesh, Monsieur Fred's pear-shaped belly, sighs, groans, creaking tendons.

"Attention!" shouted the instructor. "Balancing with alternate leg-raising."

There they are perched on one foot like flamingos, arms and torsos straining forward, the foot bearing the weight of the body twisting and grinding in the sand.

"One . . . two . . ."

Hulot approaches the P.T. instructor. He is holding some sections of the paddle from his canoe and he asks the P.T. instructor how to put them together. Amiably and efficiently, the P.T. instructor gives him the necessary information.

"First you do this, then that . . ."

His pupils, abandoned in their unfortunate posture, start to waver and wobble. Sweat stands out on their foreheads. A middle-aged lady grits her remaining teeth. They pant and tremble like leaves in the wind. They must keep it up.

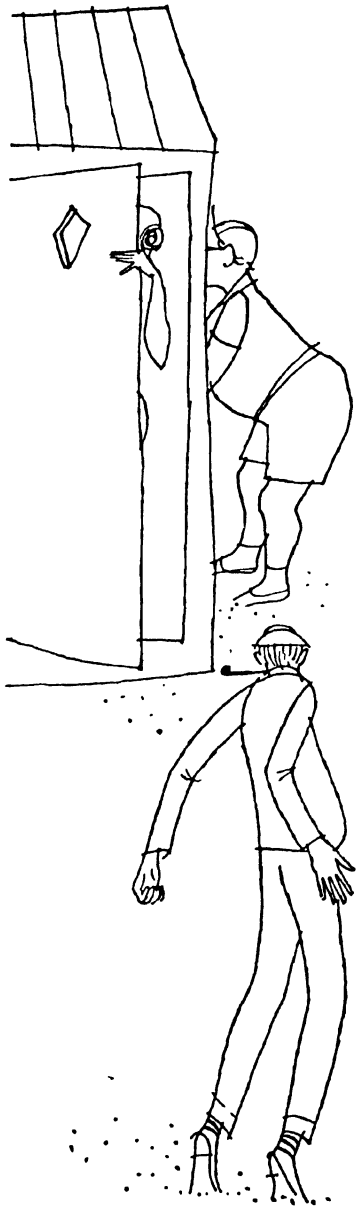
They can't hold on any longer. They . . . In the nick of time! Hulot's found out what he wanted. A quick lift of his hat and he's away. The P.T. instructor blows his whistle.

"Attention! Legs apart! Left leg raise!"

Ouf! I suffered for them.

"One . . . two . . . breathe in . . . breathe out . . ."

And off Hulot strides without a care in the world. It hasn't occurred to him that he has been holding up the 'keep fit' class. He never notices the non-stop sequence of accidents which follows his progress. How is it that, despite all his politeness and eagerness to help, he is utterly unconscious of anyone else's



existence? Could he behave differently if he wanted?

Now, the tubes still under his arm, he has reached the women's cabins. A naked arm, the swirl of a bathrobe: Martine slips into one of the bathing huts.

Chest thrust forward, Hulot hurries along. On the way he bows to Madame Dubreuilh who, seated in front of her niece's cabin, is sheltering her hair from the wind and rhapsodising quietly on the beauties of nature. As Hulot passes the cabin, the door closes discreetly.

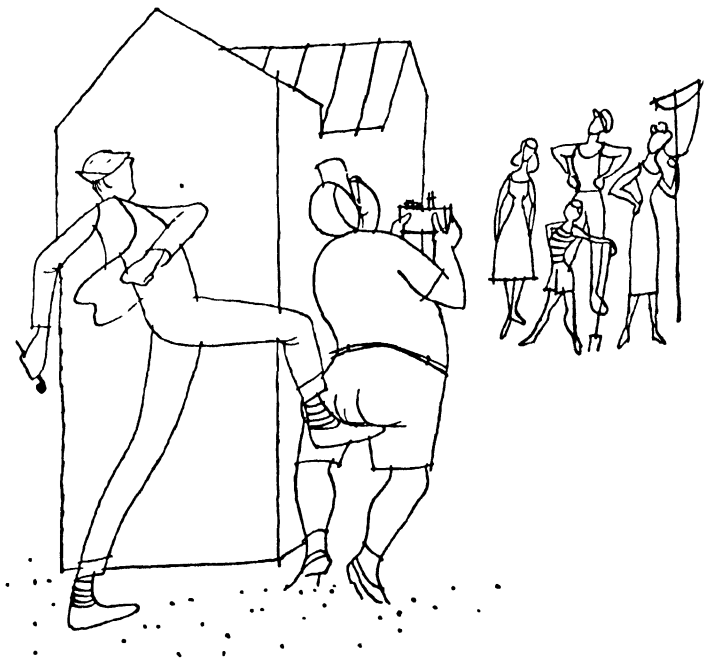
Then he stops dead in his tracks.

How horrible! There, in front of his very eyes, is a man's back, bent double, protruding from behind the cabin. From his motionless stance it is evident that he has found a small hole

and is peering through it. He is spying on Martine.

Monsieur Hulot's chivalrous blood boils in his veins. Deeply outraged, he takes a short run, raises his right foot and, with all his strength, delivers a kick on the tight-stretched rump of . . . of Monsieur Smutte who was bending over to take a photograph.

Monsieur Smutte is a keen amateur photographer. He arranges groups of people, and then asks everyone to look perfectly natural—the last thing any of his sitters intends, one of whom is exhibiting his favourite



profile, while another is showing off her legs. Sometimes, for a joke, someone puts on a sombrero. Then at the exact moment that Monsieur Smutte begs for the inevitable smile and gives the fatal order: "Don't move, please," he is called to the telephone, leaving all his sitters in a state of suspended animation.

But today, it is not the telephone.

It is a vigorous kick on the behind.

The Belgian leaps forward. His honour has been outraged. Vengeance is called for.

Hulot, terrified, recognises Monsieur Smutte (who has the muscles of a stoker) and turns tail and runs. Monsieur Smutte, his Kodak shaking angrily in his hands, searches for the culprit.

And finds him.

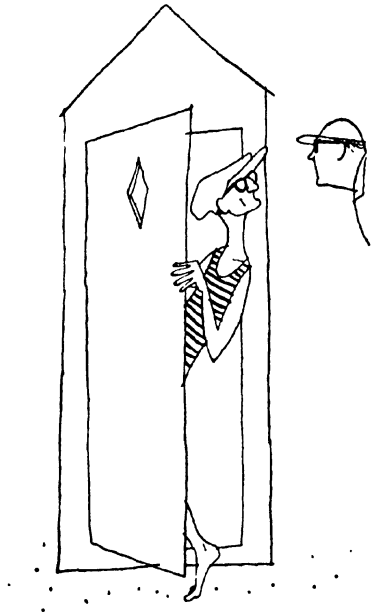
Innocently sitting on the ground an old man, wearing a yachting cap, has removed his beach shoes, and is wiping his feet and massaging them as if his toes were sore.

After all, he could be suffering from a splinter or a corn. There's no law against it.

But for the moment the law holds no interest for Monsieur Smutte. What does interest him is the old man's foot. Why, if it did not deliver the kick, should it be receiving such attention? Without a word he advances menacingly.

The old man gets up and steps back. There is a beach hut just behind him. Without seeking an explanation, he takes refuge in it, barricades the door, and

endeavours to make himself as small as possible. He simply cannot understand why the large gentleman in horn-rimmed glasses and a sports shirt, whom he has never seen before and whom he doesn't know from Adam, should be staring at him so indignantly through the small opening in the upper half of the door.



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I leave them to it. My wife has got some way in front. Unless I catch her up quickly, there'll be some explaining to do.

Only too often I have to break off my narrative just when it's getting interesting. You mustn't be surprised at the sketchiness of my notes, it's the consequence of always being on the move. I can only manage to catch fragments of scenes. Nearly always I miss the ending. I don't know whether Monsieur Smutte spent a long time in front of the cabin, or if the man with the aching feet tried to run for it. I'm used to this sort of uncertainty. As I'm always a passer-by, I have to be content with the merest glimpses of what

goes on. It's like being in a train where one only half sees the country through which one is travelling.

On the edge of the beach, Hulot is repainting his canoe, the waves playing round his paint-pot, now washing it away, now bringing it back again—but never to where Hulot dips his brush. The pot dances sedately from one side of the canoe to the other.

The mocking waves have found someone they can play with. Hulot is not a man to realise that the sea is always lying in wait. He doesn't feel behind him the vast and terrible presence which is amusing itself silently and invisibly with his paint-pot.

All around, the beach is livening up. Mothers arrive with their brats. Buckets, spades and rakes go into

action. In every child's breast the heart of an architect beats fast. Temporary fortresses are raised which will collapse with the oncoming tide. Wretched constructions, castles in Spain . . . At an impressionable age we teach our children to build on sand.

One beach ball and then another. A third and a fourth. It's snowing beach balls. The beach ball is suddenly king of the beach, tossed and caught in a hundred different ways, from a hundred different directions, red or green, huge or small, sometimes even, melon-like, painted in slices.

Parasols open up. Deck-chairs, stubborn as mules, resist all efforts at manipulation. The women demonstrate the progress of their knitting and inspect their skins for the first traces of tan.

"Look, dear: you can already see where my bodice stops."

Further on, as I follow in the wake of my wife, I see Martine, wearing a head-scarf, a low-cut pullover and shorts, and sitting at the water's edge. Her gaze wanders dreamily out to sea. Beside her, the intellectual is delivering a peroration. (The blackguard! He has been masking his true nature all along.) He drones on and on:

"Quite the contrary! The fundamental incoherence of the *bourgeoisie* is never more patently manifest than in its refusal . . ."

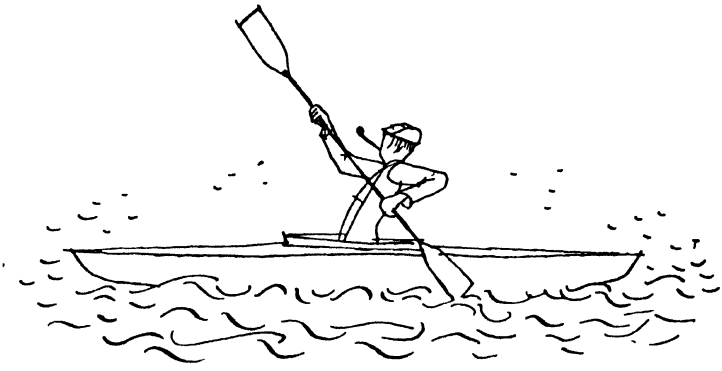
Well within range of Martine's eyes, Pierre is sailing a little skiff. The two triangular sails are stretched to

breaking-point. Bent backwards over the water to provide a counter-weight, the athlete puffs out his chest.

Thus each wooer wields the weapons of his choice. So I was right in suspecting the philosopher of having an eye on Martine. Now it's a straight fight between mind and matter. The philosopher, in lieu of a serenade, offers a lecture in political economy. Perhaps Martine is at heart the suffragette-type. For the present Pierre must bide his time.

At the moment they're barely past the starting line. But they've got the rest of the holidays before them.

The sailing-boat draws away. Martine follows it nonchalantly with her eyes. But here comes a third



pretender, no other than Hulot himself. Dressed for the part, hair well-brushed, back like a ramrod, he is paddling along solemnly in his canoe, some yards out from the shore. Martine sees him and smiles . . . Hulot amuses her. So much the better. She watches him as he battles with the waves.

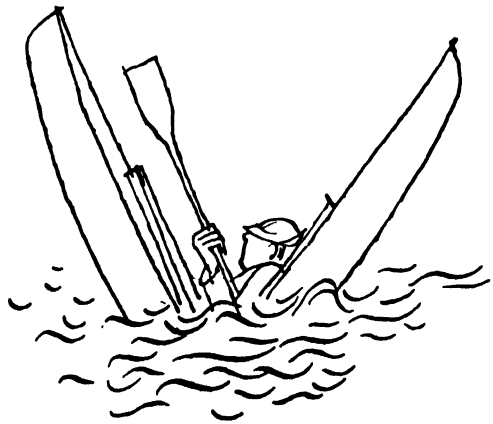
Then she glances at her watch, picks up her beach things—a towel, a bathing cap, a bag and a magazine —and gets up, her shorts revealing slender, well-moulded legs. The philosopher, who is still talking and deep in his manuscript, suddenly realises she is leaving.

"You're off already?"

He looks heart-broken. Martine tosses her head and goes on her way. The young man, after a quick glance out to sea (but the rival sailing-boat has disappeared), picks up his own belongings and dashes after her.

From the sea comes a sound like a door slamming.

I turn round.

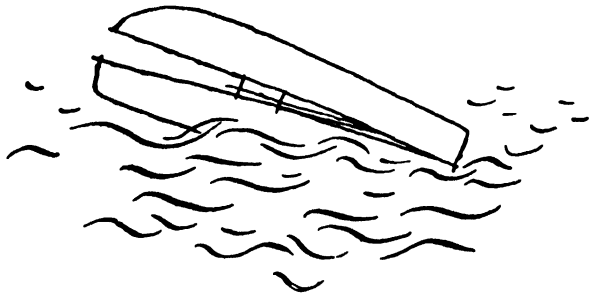


Poor Hulot. The sea is playing yet another joke on him. His canoe, for some inexplicable reason, has folded at the middle. The two ends have left the water and are joining vertically, so that Hulot is completely enclosed within his wedge-shaped box which looks like the white jaw of a killer shark. It sinks quietly below the surface.

A double paddle, a little wooden seat and a white hat float away on the guilty waves. Monsieur Hulot has disappeared without a single cry.

Soon he will have aroused in me every conceivable emotion.

The fishermen chuckle from the edge of the beach. The canoe, still folded up, reappears and tosses about from one wave to another. But Monsieur Hulot does not reappear. It is one more episode in his struggle with inanimate objects.



For, like us, they refuse to obey him and to play his game. Objects which one considers to be inanimate, objects which are malleable in other people's hands, resist him all along the line. Hulot concentrates all his forces to grapple with them: invariably the outcome is bizarre. Take the little crate on wheels. She coughs and splutters, has her moods and fits of caprice, but in the end her wheels go round. She has been tamed. Or very nearly.

Hulot tries to shape things in his own image. One feels that one of his chance encounters could lead to absolutely anything.

"What's the matter? Aren't you coming?"

Heavens! My wife . . .

"It's just on one . . ."

"I'm coming."

"Hurry up!"

"Here I am . . ."

It being nearly lunch-time, the beach empties. Monsieur Hulot, soaked to the skin, makes a beeline for the hotel. In order to hide his shame, he wants to get there before us.

The Colonel is in the hall, in excellent spirits. He has ferreted out the English couple and won't let them go. Unluckily these two subjects of Her Most Gracious Majesty have only a very rudimentary knowledge of French. But that doesn't worry the Colonel, who has fought side by side with 'our faithful allies' (or, as he sometimes says, 'our hereditary enemies'). In addition to which he can recite a few of the better-known lines of Shakespeare.

But what do I see?

Wet footprints on Monsieur Ménard's tiled floor. What on earth . . .? The footprints peter out at the coat-stand, beside which the Colonel is standing.

Underneath the coat-stand Monsieur Hulot's feet.

He's hiding there.

At last I'm in on one of his pranks. What luck! He has messed up the floor after his involuntary bath and is frightened of Monsieur Ménard's anger. There he is, all but invisible, desperately holding his breath. Two feet and the end of a paddle is all that one can see of him. A game of cops and robbers! For once I'm in luck.

Some guests come into the hall. A few hang up their hats.

The Colonel has gripped the Englishman by the arm:

"At that time I was an officer, *Les Ardennes* . . . you know *Les Ardennes*? Very dangerous sector, *vous vous rappelez, n'est-ce pas?*"

The Englishman nods. He's wearing a mauve and yellow striped blazer with a crest, and white shorts

down to his knees. His wife is wearing a shapeless hat and, to show how sensible she is, the same shoes as her husband.

From the dining-room comes the sound of people sitting down to table.

"Well," says the Colonel, "I don't know *si vous connaissez les Ardennes* in war-time, but it is less easy to promenade there than in the Champs-Elysées . . ."

So saying, he hitches up the bottoms of his trousers. The Colonel's behaviour attracts Monsieur Ménard's attention. Suddenly he catches sight of the footprints. He moves forward, his gaze fixed on the Colonel, suspect number one. The Colonel continues to gesticulate. Monsieur Ménard, clasping his hands behind his back, walks over to him.

"The general, *un bon ami à moi*, a good friend, *me dit* . . ."

But the clock strikes. The general's story will have to wait.

"Ah! Ah!" says the Colonel, coming up to the salute and clicking his heels. Leaving the flabbergasted couple, he marches off to the dining-room.

Monsieur Ménard, following the Colonel with his eyes, perceives that his shoes are impeccable. Bewildered, he turns about.

The hat-stand suddenly gives a wobble. Monsieur Ménard runs a suspicious hand over the pile of hats and coats. A delicious tremor of fear shoots up and down my spine.

Monsieur Ménard finds nothing. But fresh footprints lead across the tiled floor to the staircase. Monsieur Hulot has adroitly made his escape. *Au revoir*, Monsieur Ménard, you've got absolutely nothing on him.

Absolutely nothing? Oh dear, what's this? A paddle suddenly comes tumbling down the stairs. The game's up.

Monsieur Ménard's face turns purple.

It reminds me of how I used to play hide-and-seek as a boy. Rubbing my hands together, I take my place at table.

"What's the matter with you?" demands my wife.

"Nothing at all, my dear."

The guests greet each other as they sit down. They complain about the high wind and how the sand gets into everything. They all discuss the latest news from Paris.

All except me.

On the menu there's garlic sausage, an omelette and braised beef. Always nice fresh sea-food at the Beach Hotel. I count my drops into the bottom of my glass.

"I'm hungry," says someone loudly.

Monsieur Ménard, still very shaken by the marks on the floor, glances up severely. So, to add insult to injury, someone's hungry. Well then, why swim? Does Monsieur Ménard swim? And why walk? Wouldn't it be much better to sit quietly sipping a warm drink in the hotel? Even bridge-playing, which scatters ash all over the floor, has one advantage—it doesn't sharpen the appetite.

'If only,' thinks Monsieur Ménard, 'it would rain all day every day.'

The waiter, grumbling and grousing, brings in the first omelette. The service door squeaks on its hinges. Hulot hasn't arrived yet. But when he does, he'll look completely innocent. He may even manage to look shocked when he sees the dirty floor.

"Now don't forget your liver," says my wife. "You know you should never touch eggs. And sauces aren't good for you either. You'd better ask for a nice, green salad."

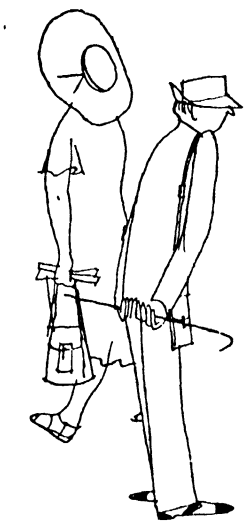
25 July

Five o'clock in the afternoon.

Depressing day. No sign of the sun. Between my window and the grey sea, a few dejected groups wander up and down the promenade. Three short walks with my wife . . .

No one in the water.

What a day! Long as only a day without Hulot can be.



26 July

At half-past six yesterday evening, after a day of acute boredom, a lorry stopped outside the hotel entrance. The driver got out and opened up the back. There was Monsieur Fred. Red and dishevelled, he was wedged between some crates of vegetables.

"Ah, my friends!" he cried, raising his arms skywards.

He was wearing only his sailor's shirt and shorts. Madame Fred dashed over to him, carrying a more suitable pair of trousers. Monsieur Fred pulled them on over his shorts. It was all quite beyond us.

Monsieur Fred entered the hotel. His breathing sounded laboured. He was obviously having difficulty in keeping up his spirits.

"But what's happened to you?" demanded Madame Fred.

"Ah, my friends! I've spent the afternoon with Hulot."

*

A little later, sitting down comfortably, Monsieur Fred told us the full story.

"I'd missed the bus," he said, "and Hulot offered me a lift; I couldn't refuse. *Noblesse oblige* and all that. I mean, what would you have done if you'd been in my place? I ask you! Not that I hadn't a grudge against him. That business of the boat, you remember. Still, to get back to what I was saying, I really wasn't keen on going off with him, especially in my shorts (though I didn't think of it at the time). But he said to me:

" 'Don't you worry. We'll soon catch up with the bus.'

" 'Catch up with the bus! I wish I could. But in this old crock . . .'

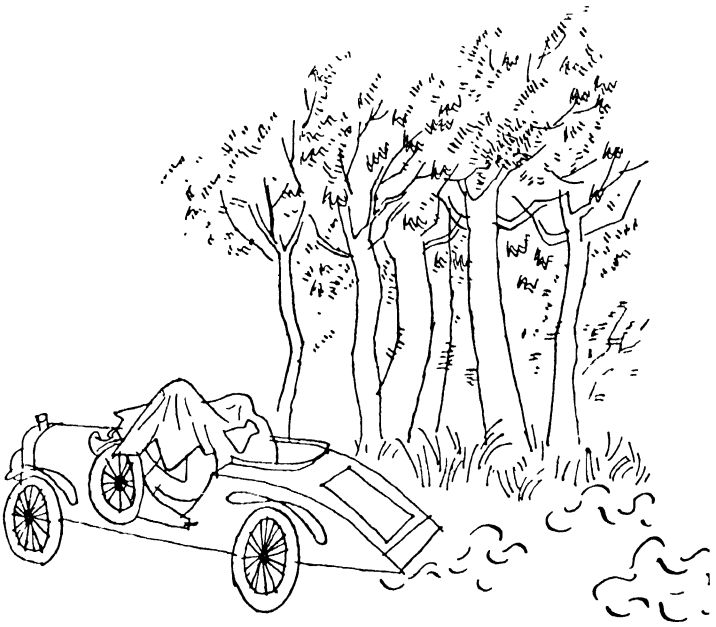
"Hulot just repeated:

" 'Don't you worry.'

"You see, for him it was a question of honour. He'd made a promise and he wasn't going to break it. We set off, with me crouching back on the cushions. Hulot announced very calmly:

" 'We'll catch up with it. You wait!'

"I've never been more shaken up in my life! My teeth rattled and chattered! I tried to shut my eyes and think of something else, but it was out of the question, quite out of the question. After some time it occurred to me that we'd taken the wrong turning, but Hulot went careering on, never hesitated a second. I thought: 'Perhaps it's a short cut.' A short cut, by God! Ruts as deep as ditches! Branches beating against the hood . . . Awful. What on earth could have possessed me to



have missed the bus? Then suddenly . . . it was night! Yes, I mean it. Deepest, blackest night. A branch had torn off the windscreen and the hood had fallen on our heads. We were literally buried in darkness. I yelled:

" 'Stop!'

"But if you imagine for a moment one can stop Hulot's car by simply ramming on the brakes . . . Now you know me. I haven't got cold feet. I went right through the war. One day a grenade exploded not six yards from me. Well, I'm telling you that I have never, never been more frightened in my life. My eyes were positively bulging, there was sweat all over my brow.

Terror, panic, anything you like to call it. And there was Hulot, cool as a cucumber, driving on at sixty miles an hour and unable to see a damn thing. The old crock had never gone at that speed before in her life. She was practically airborne! Jolting, heaving and pitching all over the shop (and you know I'm used to the sea). Suddenly the sound of gravel under the tires. How had we got there? You tell me. Then I realised I couldn't hear the engine. Splutter, splutter, silence. At the same time the car came to a halt. But don't go away, this isn't the end of the story, not by a long chalk. You haven't heard anything yet. Hulot says very formally:

" 'Engine's stalled.'

" 'Well,' I say to myself, 'what could be better? I'm lost in the back of beyond with Hulot, his old crock broken down, the windscreen torn off and no trousers.' Question of modesty, if you see what I mean. What a fine kettle of fish. And to think if I'd only caught that bus . . . I tried to get out of the car, poked one of my legs through the door, at the same time raising the hood and taking a quick look round. And what do I see? God Almighty . . . You'll never guess. First of all a cypress. Then a hearse, choir-boys and a procession of people in black. Black railings, tomb-stones . . . Have you got it? We were in a cemetery. A burial was in progress and, don't forget, I was still in shorts. The moment I realised, I drew my leg back into the car and said to Hulot:

" 'I can't get out like this. You'll have to.'

"He raised the hood and clambered out. He had the right sort of expression on his face, dead solemn. That was absolutely essential. I must say he carried it off very well. Even so, the mourners gave us some queer looks. Hulot raised his hat to them. He's very good at that sort of thing. I assure you, I was quaking in my shoes. Oh, if only I hadn't missed that bus . . . Well, to cut a long story short, I stayed put. Men with moustaches and women with veils kept strolling up and down. I tried to pull the hood over my legs. Damn thing wouldn't budge. Hulot groped around in the boot for the starting-handle, but as he was doing so he dropped an inner tube on the ground. You know what an inner tube is, don't you? But wait. This bit's scarcely believable. Just concentrate on this inner tube. Some dead leaves got stuck to the outside of it, on the

rubber. When Hulot picked it up again, it looked just like a wreath. You know the sort. *In Loving Memory. He was a good father and a good husband*, and so on. Same size, same border of leaves. And that's precisely what someone mistook it for! I mean it! An official came up, took the inner tube right out of Hulot's hands and carried it off with the other wreaths. A fantastic situation! Supposing half-way through the ceremony the air had escaped and it had started to whistle! Or if someone had looked for an inscription and found: 'With the compliments of Dunlop' or something equally inappropriate. It wouldn't have been proper. I mean it just isn't done to joke about death, is it? While all this was going on I slipped quietly out of the car and tiptoed to the gates, cutting a fine figure in my shorts, I don't doubt. And if there's one thing I don't like, it's funerals. Hulot, without turning a hair, has started to fiddle with the engine. What a performance! First he presses the self-starter and it sounds as if all hell's broken loose. Then he turns the starting-handle and there's a terrible grinding noise. Then he gives a quick lift of his hat to excuse himself for the row he's making. And of course it all makes absolutely no difference. The only thing left is to push. Don't think I was going to lend a hand. Certainly not. I was too busy hiding my legs behind the bushes on the other side of the gates. Luckily four chaps in their Sunday-best offered to help. 'Thank goodness for that,' I said to myself. As the car passed through the gates, the

engine started up. 'Wonderful!' you might think. But you don't know Hulot. He had to go back to say 'thank you', for the push! Absolutely had to. Courtesy, courtesy all the way! So instead of beating a retreat he got out of the car and went to shake hands with the four Good Samaritans. Now you know how it is at the end of a funeral. Everyone looks very grieved and takes it in turn to shake hands with the other mourners and the members of the family. Well, those who'd had enough of it all noticed some hand-shaking was going on, and said to themselves: 'Thank God for that. It's over,' and just walked out on the whole thing. And the curé (the spade still in his hand), the acolytes and the grave-digger were all left high and dry. Everyone started saying good-bye to everyone else. Hand-shakes all round. People taking each other by the arm. 'All my sympathy . . .' 'your sad loss . . .' 'it's always the best who are taken . . .' 'to think that only yesterday he was as fit as you or I . . .' I saw the whole thing from behind the gates. Incredible? But it's the truth. I give you my word. I swear I haven't made anything up. What I'd give not to have missed that cursed bus! But that's not all of it. Just listen to what happened next. I was beginning to lose my nerve. 'It'll end badly, Fred, it'll end badly,' I was saying to myself, when an old lady came on the scene, with a very long feather stuck in her hat which tickled the nose of everyone she shook hands with, all the way down the line. A minute earlier they'd all been on the verge of

tears. Now they all began to laugh like lunatics. Hulot was worse than any of them. In no time at all, they were all reeling around, slapping their thighs. Well, as soon as I saw that the funeral was turning into the Crazy Gang I said to myself: 'Fred, my lad, it'll end badly. They've all gone mad. Make yourself scarce while the going's good.' I mean I like a laugh as well as the next man, but there are limits. So off I went as fast as my legs would carry me. I stopped the first lorry I saw, and here I am . . ."

That was the end of Monsieur Fred's story. We had a round of drinks (which at least brought a smile to Monsieur Ménard's lips).

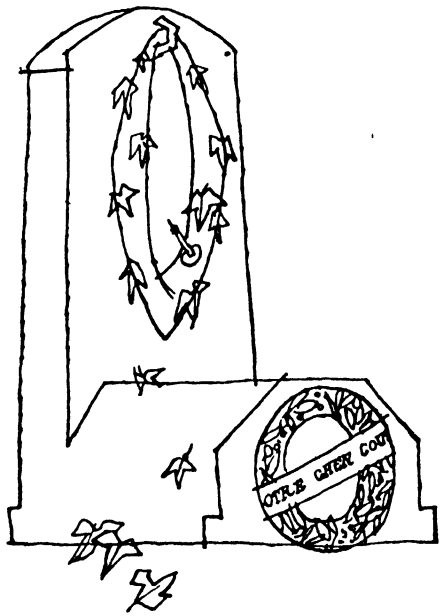
The whole account had fascinated me. But what a wasted opportunity! Monsieur Fred, the blockhead, just hadn't realised how lucky he'd been. The possibility of winning Hulot's friendship . . . The mere fact of being with him . . . The prospect of endless, unforeseeable adventures . . .

Hulot, as one might have guessed, returned very late and very drunk (to the fury of the waiter who had

had to stay up till midnight to serve a meal which Hulot couldn't even look at). Nor did he return alone. Other revellers had somehow managed to clamber on his car and once again everyone in the hotel was woken up. Uproar and merry-making on the staircases. Electrical gala as the windows lit up one after another. What was going on? An air-raid? An earthquake? Hulot was going up to bed.

That night I dreamt about a fantastic cemetery.

The cypresses were hung with garlands of inner tubes and Venetian lanterns shaped like umbrellas. Rockets and firecrackers were bursting overhead. A



tipsy crowd yelled, danced and caroused about the tombs and avenues. Confetti rained down. A gigantic Monsieur Hulot was conducting an orchestra in a large and luxurious family vault. Looking closer, I noticed that these irreverent roisterers who were showing absolutely no respect for the departed, and who were repeatedly shaking each other by the hand, all walked in a peculiar way, the Hulot way. They were all wearing little white hats. Pipes stuck out of their mouths. And their legs were long. Long and stiff . . .

27 July

Hulot dominates the whole coast from his attic window. He dashes up there every time he provokes a disaster. It's his last bastion, also his watch-tower. There, safe from assault, he gazes down on us.

And his eye misses nothing. Whenever he makes a gaffe, he likes to know the exact consequences. With the closest attention he observes the ants who swarm about his feet—ants whose way of life has been turned topsy-turvy by a negligent kick.

He is full of curiosity.

But can he see beneath the surface? I doubt it. Is he aware of the chivalrous machinations of Pierre and the intellectual, between whom Martine's choice may be wavering? Does he see that the amorous Brazilian is getting a bit fed-up waiting for what never happens? Is he amused by the antics of Monsieur Smutte? Or by the non-stop monologues of the Colonel?

Does the overall spectacle of our lives hold even a minimal interest for him?

Again I doubt it.

People and things are even greater stumbling-blocks

for him than for us. But in his case, the contrary is also true. Wherever he goes, he is a test case. People divide into two parties. One party accepts him, the other rejects him. Success balances failure. Victory balances defeat. The car and the canoe. The elderly English lady and Monsieur Fred. One has to make up one's own mind which side one is on.

I must confess I'm still hesitating.

*

Midday. One can just glimpse the sun through the clouds. Maybe it's going to turn out nice. If it does, I shall probably find myself on top of the cliff.

The newsvendor passes the hotel. His papers are stacked on the back of his bicycle. He blows his horn and cries:

"Read all about it! Read all about it!"

Everyone rushes out to buy the paper. Everyone, including Monsieur Hulot. Surprising! I find it hard to associate him with law-court reports, political commentaries, sporting results and gossip columns . . .

Ah, now I understand.

When his canoe capsized, Hulot lost his hat. And if one hasn't a hat, how can one raise it? Without even glancing at the news, Hulot carefully lays the newspaper across his knees, folds it into a hat and puts it on his head. It makes him look like a pantomime policeman.

Too bad for the Press barons. Never mind. They have plenty of loyal subjects.

No one looks up as he enters the dining-room. He sits down and starts his breakfast. The wireless regales us with the city prices.

". . . net gains in Indonesian commodity stocks, wheat, sugar, coffee . . . raw gum prices tended to rise . . . an interesting news item has just been released by the New York Cotton Exchange. Internal consumption has risen to over nine million bales as against eight million, eight hundred thousand bales in the previous report . . . rubber is sluggish, leather lively . . ."

Monsieur Smutte doesn't miss a syllable or the fraction of a syllable. The other guests chew their food in silence. It would be sacrilege to speak while the news is on. Hulot swallows the wrong way, starts to cough, turns red and nearly chokes. Murderous glances come at him from all sides. His coughing fit under control, he hastily composes his features and piously hears out the fat-stock prices.

From all accounts it seems that the funeral party wound up round a cask of wine in the kitchens or cellar of one of the neighbouring farms. Everyone drank his fill.

Hulot brought back two or three black-clad revellers in his car. (How or why, no one knows.) They passed the night under the stars. All morning they have been staggering up and down the beach. A curious sight . . .

Our neighbours in the dining-room take care not to

look at Hulot, the drunkard, the blasphemer, the good-for-nothing. They find him repellent, but at the same time they're a little scared of him. This is a good sign. I'm glad that the somewhat satanic aspect of his character should be recognised.

For my part, I shoot glances at him out of the corner of my eyes. I don't care to admit it, but when he's not there, time hangs very heavily. When he is there, it's as if the sun's come out. If only I had the courage to make the first move, to go over to him and say . . .

But what would I say?

And after all, would it be of any use?

*

At four o'clock in the afternoon, Monsieur Hulot went for a bathe. You know what is meant by 'sea-bathing'? It's a curious recreation. Even quite elderly ladies trail their white ankles up and down the water's edge. Others leap into the waves however cold it is—like those crazy Cossacks who, it is said, used to break the ice on the Neva for their daily bathe. The sea always has a surprise up its sleeve. When you're in, you exclaim how good it is, how really delicious and delightful—despite the fact that it gets up your nose and down your throat and makes your eyes smart, despite the shells which cut your feet, the slimy jelly-fish, all the venomous creatures just below the surface of the sand . . . brr . . .

The sea is crammed with bathers, splashing each other, diving, coming up spluttering. The heroes swim out to sea, thirty yards or more. The jokers disappear under water and catch hold of their friends' legs. Swimmers equipped with goggles and breathing-tubes play at submarines. Inflated rubber horses and seals dance on the crests of the waves. A barking dog is being bathed by its owner.

"Stop pushing!"

"Can your feet touch bottom?"

"What big waves . . ."

"It's like being on a swing . . ."

"The water doesn't hold you up like in the Mediterranean . . ."

"Quite different . . ."

"There's much less salt . . ."

"That's one blessing . . ."

And when you get out (if you do gèt out) an icy wind whips round your naked legs and torso. You jump up and down, teeth chattering. Quick—a bathrobe, towels, a pullover, socks, a hot drink. That's the last dip *this* holiday!

Don't you believe it!

Just wait till tomorrow. It only needs one daredevil to lead the way and all the rest, grim as death, follow. Rats trailing in the wake of the Pied Piper . . .

Today, Hulot was one of the rats.

*

He arrives on the beach and selects a vacant patch of sand. Despite the wind he stretches out his towel and lies down for a five-minute sunbathe. Sand sticks to his eyelashes and blows up his nostrils.

Then he gets up, and without a qualm marches straight into the sea. Monsieur Fred, his hands clasped about his belly, is sitting in shallow water. Hulot immediately offers him his hand (it doesn't occur to him for a moment that Monsieur Fred may bear him any grudge for what took place in the cemetery). Monsieur Fred pretends not to see him. Still in a huff, the poor fellow.

Hulot is at a loss as to what to do with his outstretched hand. Not far away, a swimming instructor is supporting a middle-aged lady by her chin. It's her first lesson. Hulot turns towards him, his hand still outstretched. The swimming instructor, taken by surprise, releases his pupil's chin and shakes hands with Hulot. His pupil's nose sinks beneath the water and she disappears.

Hulot wanders on.

In a boned swimsuit, Madame Dubreuilh, Martine's aunt, is busy greeting her acquaintances. As Hulot approaches she smiles and stretches out her hand. Hulot, desperately grateful for an opportunity to be polite, rushes forward.

A mountainous wave bears down on them. Madame Dubreuilh sees it coming, steps back quickly and gives a little jump. Hulot misses the outstretched hand. The

wave swallows him up. He disappears.

The wave passes. Madame Dubreuilh looks all round for Hulot. There's no trace of him.

I pass to and fro, from the jetty to the rock pool and the rock pool to the jetty. Monsieur Smutte, eyes half-closed, is floating in four feet of water. Calculations and statistics are waltzing through his head. Sell these stocks to buy those . . . Sell those stocks to buy these . . .

"Monsieur Smutte!" cries the waiter from the beach. "Te . . . telephone!"

What's that? The telephone! Not a second to lose. London on the line! Or Amsterdam! Monsieur Smutte rolls over and strikes out vigorously, but, alas, in the wrong direction. Arms flailing, he thrashes out to sea.

A little farther up the beach, Monsieur Hulot is emerging from the water, half-drowned and half-blind, his hair all over his face, raising his knees as though still clambering over imaginary waves.

One of Monsieur Hulot's black-clad revellers is snoozing on the beach. His mouth has fallen open. He is snoring. His frock-coat might have been fashionable fifty years ago. His bow hangs limply. His patent leather shoes are covered with sand. His pillow is a dusty bowler. What on earth is he doing there?

Martine is playing at volley-ball. She and Pierre are on the same side. The latter desperately exerts himself

in attempts to dazzle her, leaping high in the air and expanding his shoulder-muscles. Martine smiles each time a point is gained. I think she's getting teased about the attention the young athlete is paying her. But it's been going on for a week and, as far as I know, hasn't come to anything.

The intellectual, feeling thoroughly out of it, is wandering disconsolately in the vicinity of the ball game. The elderly English lady, brandishing a tennis racket, is walking up the beach. He tacks on to her.

"What Man needs," he insists, "is an ideal . . ."

The English lady scarcely hears him. She is looking for someone.

It's nearly six o'clock. The Colonel, feet bare, white trousers tucked above the knees, is explaining to three old ladies (like the Graces, old ladies go about in threes) why the Carcassonne fortifications are no longer adapted to modern warfare. He tries to hook the English lady as she passes in full flight from the intellectual. But she eludes him. She knows the Colonel.

"Mister Hulo-o-o!" She has glimpsed her quarry.

Does she want to talk tennis with him?

The bathers struggle into their clothes, some in cabins, some behind towels. Tortuous modesties. Costumes which stick to skin still slightly damp. Shameless wind, intruding everywhere, seeing everything.

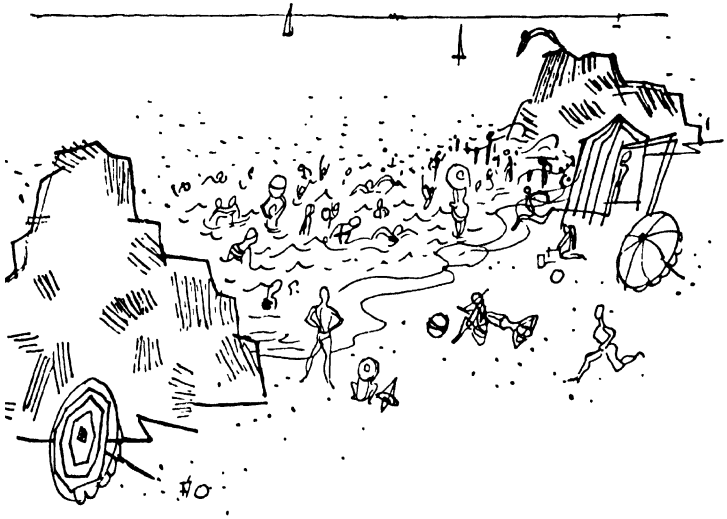
Passing the ice-cream cart, Hulot notices that the roll of soft candy-floss is stretching, stretching . . . He executes a war-jig in his anxiety. Is it going to fall? Going, going . . . The ice-cream man catches it just in time. Hulot proceeds to the hotel, his mind at rest, but a trifle disappointed.

Down on the beach, Monsieur Hulot's frock-coated friend, woken perhaps by the sudden drop in temperature, sits up and fondles his aching head. His moustache floats wildly in the wind. "God!" he mutters, "the sea . . ."

As they pass, people turn and stare at him.

Parasols and deck-chairs are folded up, bathing costumes, towels, bags, buckets, spades and rakes gathered together. Everything ready? Then off we go. In no time at all, the beach is empty.

Closing time. Till tomorrow.



29 July

"Too late! You're too late!" cried the English lady as soon as she caught sight of us. As we drew nearer, she shouted: "You don't know what you've just missed. It was marvellous! Simply marvellous!"

Scarlet under her lopsided tennis cap, Miss Topping started to run. My wife and I had been strolling quietly in the direction of the tennis club. We saw that she was very excited. I sensed the hand of Hulot.

"What's happened, Miss Topping?"

"What's happened! You ask what's happened! Why, the tennis match of the century!"

"But who?"

"Hulot, of course!"

"Hulot?"

"Yes!"

"He won?"

"Yes!"

"But how?"

"Oh!"

Miss Topping collapsed on to a bench. Hands on knees, she fought for breath.

"Oh . . . Oh . . ." she gasped, half laughing, half groaning.

"Do tell us everything," I said.

And to show how well educated I was, I added in English:

"If you please."

"Well," she said. "Mister Hulot gave me a lift in his car. And what a car! Terrific! As we drew up at the tennis club, four young ladies were playing a set, running and jumping and squawking like . . . like little birds, like little canaries in a big . . . a big cage! A few people were sitting drinking in the shade. Well, we arrived on the scene. Mister Hulot cut off the motor, and the car went *boom*! Just like a cannon. The young ladies stopped playing. Anyway, we got out. Mister Hulot announced:

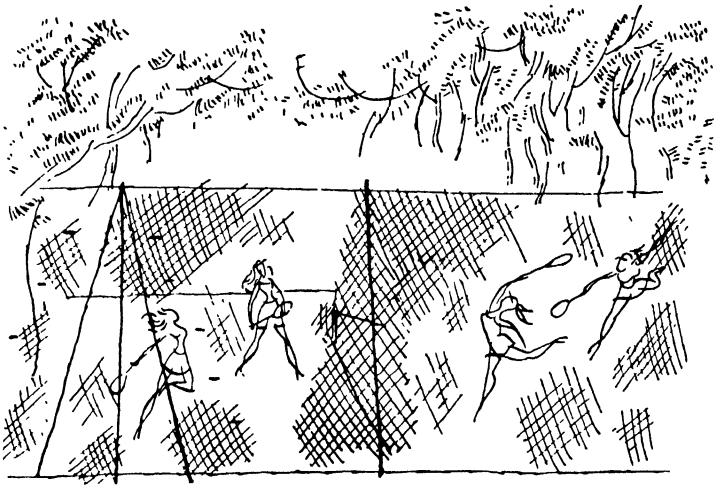
" 'I'm going to play.'

" 'Good.' "

Miss Topping speaks French fairly well. She has a charming accent. Her gestures amply make up for the gaps in her knowledge.

"Everyone was very put out by the bang and the reek of petrol. 'What's going on? Who's that man?' someone asked. 'It's Mister Hulot,' said the Colonel. And Peter—you know Peter?—Peter wanted to know if Mister Hulot was a good tennis player, and asked the Colonel. The Colonel replied: 'Pooh . . .' "

"I think," I interrupted, "that the Colonel played Hulot and beat him hollow."



"Ah? Really? . . ." replied Miss Topping banteringly. "Well, listen then. I climbed the umpire's ladder. (You know I teach tennis, golf and cricket at Exeter Girls' College? A very select school. Only the best families . . .) Then Mister Hulot came on to the court. He was still wearing his jacket and paper hat and looked very dignified. He was playing against two young ladies wearing . . . wearing . . . What do you call them?"

"Shorts?"

"Yes, shorts. White shorts. The young ladies said: 'Ready!' I said: 'Let's go!' Then if only you'd been there, you'd have seen the most extraordinary sight of

your lives!"

Miss Topping got to her feet.

"It was Mister Hulot's service. He held his racket . . . his racket . . . How shall I put it? Ah, yes, horizontally, like this, left foot forward (Figure 1). He pumped it up and down once or twice like a . . . a piston (Figure 2), then he suddenly raised it and hit the ball very, very hard (Figure 3) like this . . ." (In her attempts to demonstrate this curious movement, Miss Topping nearly fell over.) "It was fantastic!"

"But, Miss Topping," I said. "So far as I know, no one's ever served like that. Why did he do it?"

"I don't know. A complete mystery! No one could make head or tail of the service, absolutely no one. The first ball hit one of the young ladies on the foot. She jumped back squeaking: 'Oh! Oh!', like a chicken hit by a pebble. Mister Hulot's point, of course. I shouted: 'Fifteen!' Everyone sat up and began to take notice. 'What's going on?' 'Astonishing!' Mister Hulot changed over, of course, and . . . one-two-three! The same motions with the racket and crash! And the same thing all over again. The second young lady was still poised waiting for the ball after it had hit the netting behind her. What a service!

"I shouted: 'Thirty!' It was perfectly incredible. No, I mean incredulous. Everyone was getting rather excited. 'Did you see that one?' they asked each other. 'What a cannon-ball! It's impossible. It's——' What was it they said? Oh, yes, 'inconceivable'. Absolutely

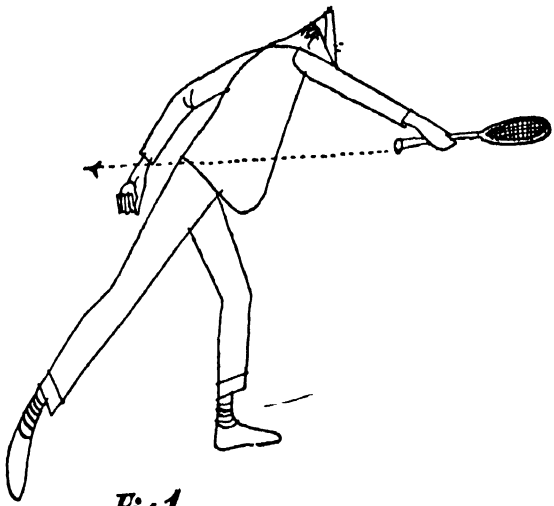


Fig. 1

inconceivable. Mister Hulot won every point. And just with the service alone. What a service! The young ladies strode off the court with their noses in the air. Then that young fellow Pierre, Peter, stripped off his pullover and said: 'I'll take him on.'

"He came prancing on to the court like a young charger." (In imitation of the young athlete, Miss Topping started to prance and, disregarding the passers-by, beat the air with an imaginary racket: backhand, volley, half-volley.) "Then he did some limbering up. You know—stretching his arms, bending his

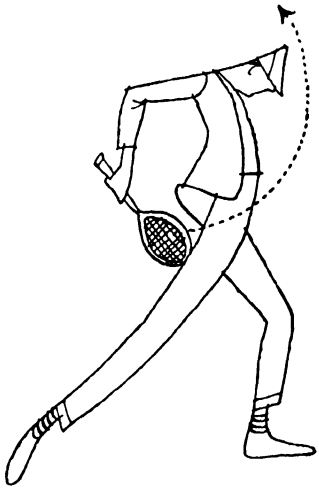


Fig. 2

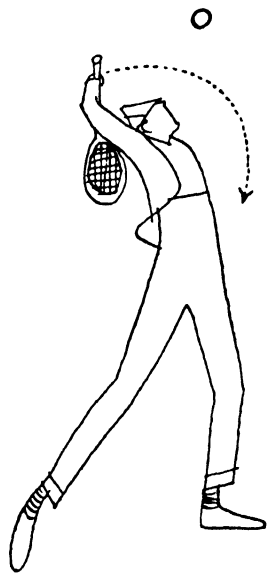
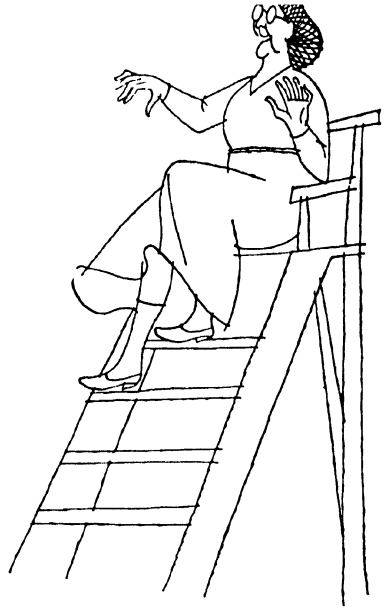


Fig. 3

knees, breathing deeply. Like this . . . But Hulot didn't turn a hair. He just stood very straight, arms crossed, his newspaper hat stuck firmly on his head. Superb, really!

"Well, when Peter had finished his exercises, I said: 'Ready?' 'Ready,' he said. I said: 'Let's go!' Well: one-two-three . . . crash! That crazy service again! In an effort to get near the ball, Peter tripped over his feet. When he got up again, his shirt-tail was hanging out . . ." (As she said this, Miss Topping started to laugh like a madwoman.) "He ran here, there, every-



where . . ." (Miss Topping started to run in all directions.) "Ridiculous! Perfectly ridiculous! One-two-three . . . wham! One-two-three . . . wham! And wham again! Absolutely no mercy! Wonderful! I shouted out: 'Game!' and Peter staggered off the court, looking exhausted, at his last gasp. Like this . . ." (Miss Topping rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue.) "Mister Hulot stayed on the court, still wearing his jacket and little hat. Then the Colonel—you know who I mean? —the Colonel was extremely annoyed. And with Peter beaten, you see, Martine, his young lady, was very, very annoyed too. She wouldn't even look at him. Poor Peter. Sad, very sad . . .

"The Colonel said: 'Give me my racket!'

"Someone found it for him. The Colonel stepped briskly on to the court, like this . . . The spectators all looked at each other in silence . . .

" 'Ready? Let's go!'

"Poor old Colonel. One-two-three . . . wham! Mister Hulot's first service knocked the Colonel's . . . the Colonel's . . ."

"Cap?"

"Yes, cap. Knocked it right down over his ears! One-two-three . . . wham! The second knocked his racket out of his hand and span him round like a top. The third caught him in the small of the back. Just here. He fell over. Out for the count! All over! Mister Hulot's game! Good-bye!"

She dashed off, shouting back over her shoulder:

"Fantastic! Fantastic!"

"Silly old crow! I couldn't understand a word she said," said my wife.

*

Fantastic!

Like Miss Topping, I was wild with joy. The miracle had happened. Hardly knowing one end of the racket from the other, Hulot had knocked the stuffing out of everyone entirely through an unreturnable service! Unreturnable and, at the same time, a bit magical. One-two-three . . . Magnificent! All his adversaries put to flight, no one able to raise a hand against him. The young ladies with their airs and graces, Pierre the superman, the Colonel with his technique—all beaten by sheer, primitive force.

For once, Hulot had found his magic wand and cast a spell. An inanimate object, a racket, had become his ally. One-two-three . . . He had waved his racket, and the ball had done the rest. And he had wiped the floor with all comers.

"Mister Hulot . . . Fantastic . . ."

The members of the tennis club hotly discuss the situation.

"Why can't he play like everyone else?" one lady demands.

"It's not allowed. Don't the rules count for anything?"

"And what about the Statutes of the Lawn Tennis Federation?"

"He must be blackballed."

Boycott—their only weapon. Hulot's too clever for them, and so he must be chased off their sterile preserves.

"Disgraceful! You saw the way he served?"

"Inconceivable!"

"One-two-three . . . and there you are!"

They attempt to imitate his famous stroke. But it's not given to everyone to be a Hulot. They lack the faith which moves mountains . . .

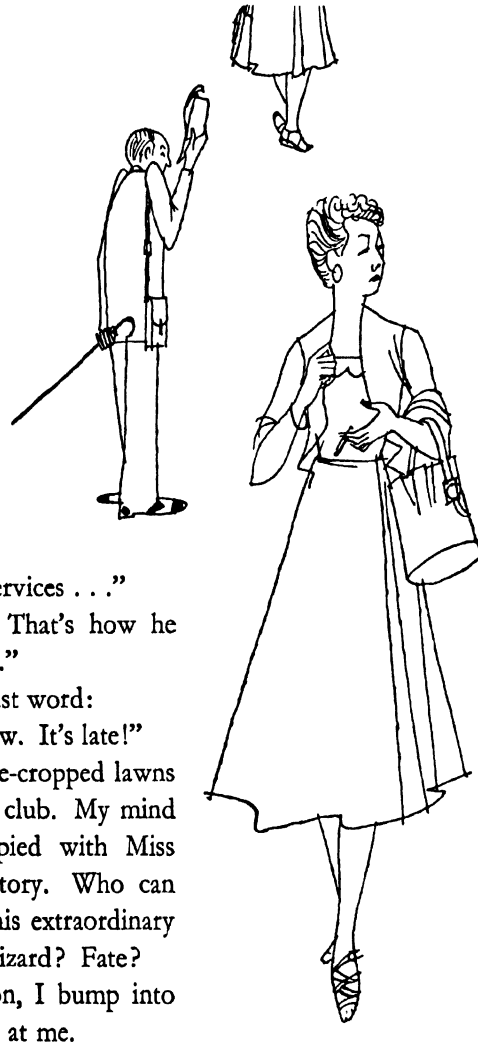
"Unpardonable," groans Pierre. "Unpardonable..."

Only Martine, cheeks slightly flushed (with joy?), says nothing. Nor does she show Pierre the least sympathy. I think that in the course of a single minute the young man has witnessed the collapse of his whole empire, the fruits of a fortnight's unremitting effort.

The Colonel, scarlet with shame and anger, declares:

"That's the last time I play with that nincompoop."

"Have you ever seen such a performance?" adds a young woman.



"Never. Those services . . ."

"It's his height. That's how he gets away with it . . ."

My wife has the last word:

"Let's go back now. It's late!"

We cross the close-cropped lawns which surround the club. My mind is exclusively occupied with Miss Topping and her story. Who can have taught Hulot his extraordinary technique? Some wizard? Fate?

Lost in speculation, I bump into my wife. She glares at me.

"What's the matter with you? Why didn't you raise your hat to Madame Dubreuilh?"

"Oh, dear . . ."

I turn quickly. Too late. Madame Dubreuilh, head in the air, is already far away.

We return to the hotel.

I must apologise for the endless repetition of this phrase. But what else can I say? The hotel is the harbour to which we always return. When we're on the jetty, the rocks or the cliff, my wife says:

"I can see the hotel. There's our bedroom window . . ."

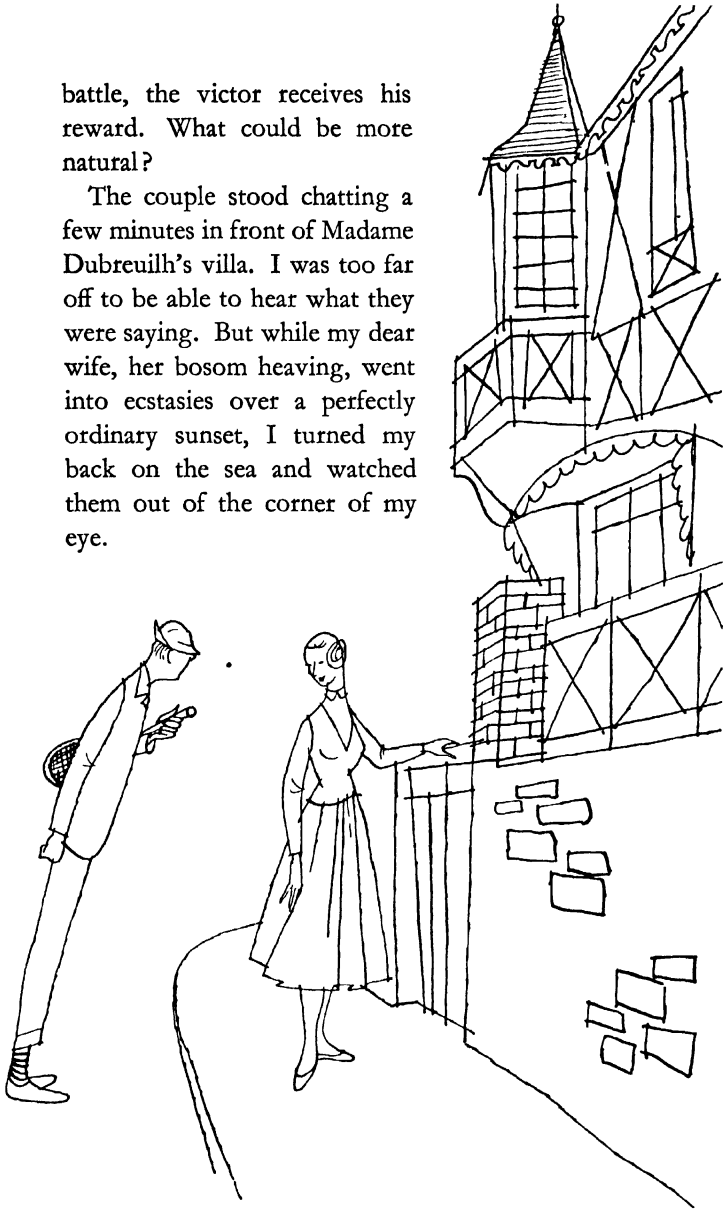
Where would we be without the hotel? Without the lounge? Without the dining-room? Daily we study the menu with demonstrative relish. Monsieur Ménard smiles affably as he watches us. Whatever our likes and dislikes we go into raptures over the *crêpes Suzette* and the crab mayonnaise. For one must never put Monsieur Ménard's back up or hurt his feelings. He is sacrosanct. A few hotheads frown as they read the menu, but Monsieur Ménard ignores them. No one knows better than he how hard it is to please everyone. But we can see how their attitude makes him suffer. Therefore we do all we can to encourage him with our smiles. He must be cajoled, made to forget the grumblers and grousers. We couldn't get by without him.

*

Hulot gave Martine a lift back in his car. After the

battle, the victor receives his reward. What could be more natural?

The couple stood chatting a few minutes in front of Madame Dubreuilh's villa. I was too far off to be able to hear what they were saying. But while my dear wife, her bosom heaving, went into ecstasies over a perfectly ordinary sunset, I turned my back on the sea and watched them out of the corner of my eye.



An understanding was springing up between them. Pierre no longer counted. The intellectual was miles away. Who knows, I may have been witnessing the birth of a new idyll, one which would prove even more stimulating than the others? But is Martine really capable of feeling anything for Monsieur Hulot? Or was she being polite? Or, again who knows, merely frivolous?

A man passed—the owner of a small stable at the bottom of the cliff. There is something about him which reminds me of the old women who hire out donkeys near the Champs-Elysées. He flatters the horseman who, it is claimed, lurks in all of us. In good weather one frequently sees whole families wreathed in smiles, cantering across the sands on man's most noble conquest.

Hulot is not the man to let an opportunity slip. He stopped the owner of the stables and it became apparent from his gestures that he was hiring two horses. Too late for today. But tomorrow, or perhaps the day after, he and Martine will go for a ride together.

How right you are, Monsieur Hulot. Profit from your advantage. If you want to shine in Martine's eyes, don't let her glorious image of you fade. And don't let time slip by.

Quickly! Miracles only happen once . . .

*

Mercredi 3 Août
de 21 H à l'aube
dans les salons de
L'Hotel de la Plage
Bal
Masqué
On est prié de venir en costume

One day a poster appeared at the hotel entrance. Beneath a vague drawing of Harlequin and Columbine, it announced:

Wednesday 3rd August:
From 9 p.m. till Dawn
A Masked Ball will be
Held at the Beach Hotel.
Fancy Dress Obligatory.

*

After dinner, on the evening of the memorable twenty-ninth of July, Hulot played a game of ping-pong with Monsieur Smutte's youngster. The ping-pong table is in a little room which opens off the hall. Hulot leapt all over the place as if he was taking part in some fantastic ballet, the quivering silhouette of his back dancing to and fro across the door, while our ears rang with the insistent crack-crack of the ball hitting the table. You can imagine the row it made.

Soon it disturbed the bridge-players in the hall. The Colonel and Madame Paillaud (one of the guests) were playing against the coquette and the love-lorn Brazilian. At the next table, Monsieur Fred and another guest were playing a spiteful game of *belote*. Madame Dubreuilh was there, and Martine, for, when they have nothing better to do, they pass the evening in the hotel.

The intellectual, standing beside Martine, was reciting his homework:

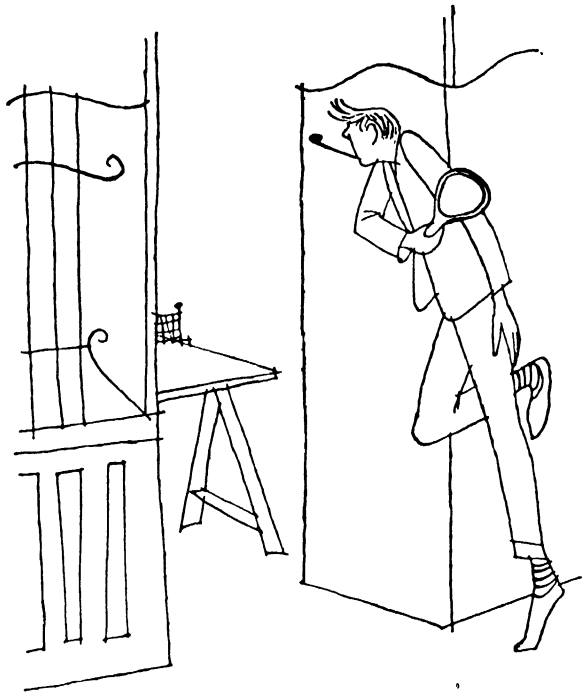
". . . it is up to the electoral body as a whole, and particularly to the women . . . I agree that a woman's place is the home, but above all let her be socially enlightened and politically conscious . . ."

Two old ladies were sipping their herbal tea and chattering like hens.

Tac! Tac-tac! Monsieur Hulot's presence could not be ignored. The balls were bouncing on the table and ricocheting against the walls. Hulot was gesticulating wildly on the threshold of the door, his back towards us. The Colonel was finding it somewhat difficult to concentrate on his cards. An ominous twitch played up and down his cheek. Infernal ping-pong! That blasted Hulot, always there to cause a disturbance and interfere with one's train of thought!

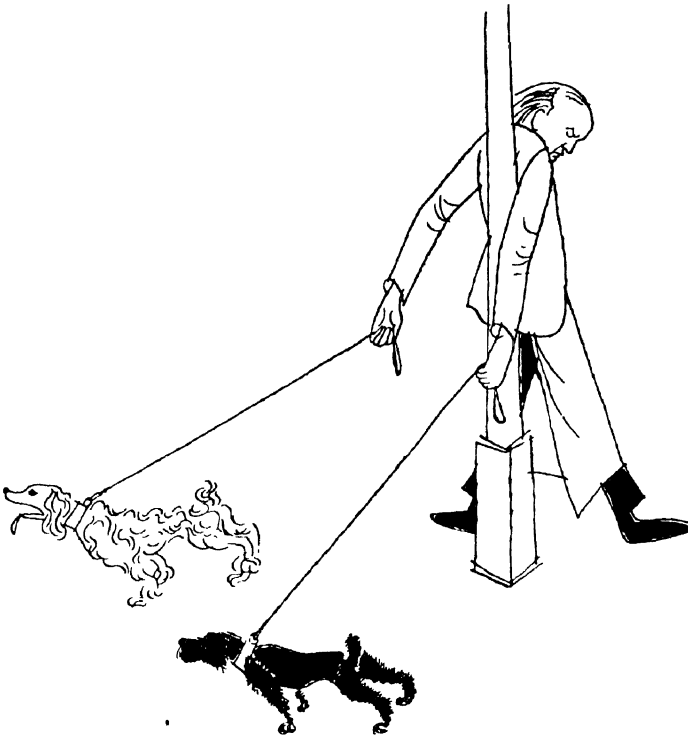
"One heart," said the coquette.

Tac-tac-tac-tac . . . a ball came bouncing across the tiled floor of the hall. Tac-tac . . . tac . . . still bouncing. The last bounce? Not yet . . . tac . . . Looking for the ball, Hulot lifted the corner of the arm-chair in which one of the old ladies was sitting, who, taken by surprise, swallowed the wrong way and choked. Next he pushed the intellectual aside and began rocking the furniture backwards and forwards. He seemed unaware that the hall was full of people. Martine picked up the ball and handed it him. He thanked her. She was the only one he consented to notice.



He returned to the ping-pong room, bouncing the ball as he went.

The waiter, dragging two dogs on leads, crossed the hall. Excited by the sound of the ping-pong balls, they hurled themselves forward. The waiter got hopelessly tangled up in the leads. In no time at all he found himself tied to one of the columns like St. Sebastian awaiting martyrdom, unable to stir a limb. The dogs began barking ferociously.



Monsieur Ménard dashed into the hall.

"Have you finished making a fool of yourself?"

"But, Monsieur Ménard . . ."

"Shut up, you clot!"

Monsieur Ménard untied the waiter. A temporary calm descended on the hall. The game of ping-pong started again. Tac, tac-tac-tac . . . Hulot shot backwards into the hall to return a smash.

"16-14!" called out Miss Topping who was umpiring.

"Where have we got to?" the coquette asked her partner.

It was clear she was exasperated. Her enormous, multi-coloured hats, which she wears in all weathers, make her look like some sort of tropical tree. Her cigarette smoke catches the edge of her sunshade and rises in a misty halo. Every part of her body bristles with necklaces, shell bracelets, jingling ear-rings, coloured stones, false pearls, glass marbles, filigree chains and rings. She's like a walking bazaar with a perpetually changing window display. And as such she constitutes all the Brazilian's hopes and fears.

"We played a heart," replied Madame Paillaud.

Tac-tac-tac-tac . . . A second ping-pong ball bounced across the hall.

Hulot reappeared among us. Probably the ball had rolled under the table. Holding on to the back of the Brazilian's chair, he got down on his knees and threaded his way between legs and skirts.

Unfortunately the Brazilian was sitting in a revolving chair.

He played a card just at the moment that the chair swivelled. It landed on the neighbouring table. The two *belote* players, deep in their game, failed to notice what had happened.

Hulot found the ball. He got up, at the same time swinging the Brazilian back into his original position, and went out.

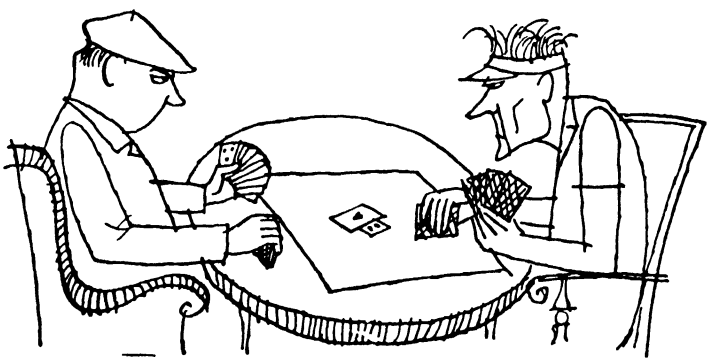
The ping-pong started up again. Tac, tac-tac . . .

"19-18!"

The card players at both tables experienced several minutes of silent amazement. It's important to grasp the situation. In the case of the *belote* players, Monsieur Fred and his opponent both looked up simultaneously, each staring incredulously at the card which had appeared between them. Monsieur Fred, who had already played that card, suspected his opponent of hiding a duplicate pack up his sleeve. But Monsieur Fred's adversary—and one understands the poor chap's predicament—knew that Monsieur Fred had already played the card, and suspected the latter of having shamelessly fished it back out of the pack for his own purposes.

Elbows on the table, both men, scarcely breathing, watched each other intently. It needed no more than a spark to set off an explosion.

At the bridge table, the Brazilian, not doubting for a



moment that he had just thrown down a master card, picked up the trick. Obviously he didn't consider his action in any way controversial. But his two opponents, and even his partner, who had not seen him put down any card, looked at him threateningly and got slowly to their feet.

All this took place without a word, in an agonised silence. Only the two old ladies continued their chatter.

Things did not stop there. Not by any means. There was something diabolic about what followed. By a simple flick of his wrist, Hulot had ignited a fever in the fanatical souls of the card-players that threatened at any moment to let all hell loose.

The game of ping-pong came to an end. Young Smutte and Hulot shook hands and returned the balls and bats to the cupboard. As usual, Hulot was totally unaware of the impending disaster which he can bring on with the slightest gesture. He crossed the hall and bowed to Martine. To Miss Topping he said in English:

"Good-bye!"

". . . good night!"

He climbed the stairs with his usual firm tread. But hardly had he reached the last step when the quarrel which had been smouldering beneath the cinders burst into flames. Nerves were at snapping-point. No one was able to bear the silence and mutual suspicion a second longer.

Monsieur Fred opened fire.

"Where did this card come from?" he demanded.

"What?" replied his opponent, who had only been awaiting an opportunity to speak. "Are you asking me . . ."

"Where did this card come from?" repeated Monsieur Fred, leaning a little further forward.

"Oh . . ." gasped the other, rendered speechless by Monsieur Fred's apparent shamelessness.

"My friend," declared the coquette at the next table, "you took that trick pretty coolly . . ."

"Which trick?" demanded the Brazilian.

"Why, the last!" cried the Colonel.

"But I played——"

"You didn't play anything at all!" shouted Madame Paillaud.

"Allow me——"

"Allow you what?" cried the coquette jumping to her feet. "That's rich . . ."

"Just picks up a trick when he feels like it!" added the Colonel.

"Cheat!" cried Monsieur Fred, getting up from his chair.

"Cheat yourself! Just you listen to me——"

"Bloody little ——"

"What did you call me?"

"You heard!"

"Monsieur," said the coquette to the Brazilian,

"what you have just done is called cheating in our language."

"*Hein!*" cried the Brazilian, his eyes starting out of his head.

"Cheating! Exactly!" confirmed the Colonel.

"You're lying!"

"Me? Lying? You ignoramus!" cried the lady in the straw hat (which tonight was black).

"Ignoramus? Me?" The Brazilian glared ferociously.

"I should say so! Dirty little dago!"

At these words, the man from Sao-Paulo lost all restraint. Green with anger, oblivious of all the laws of gallantry, he let fly with a volley of insults. The coquette began to bridle. The little wretch! And to think he'd been courting her on his knees for two weeks! Malevolent monster! How careful he'd been to conceal his true, primitive nature!

"That's enough, monsieur!"

Enough? That was about it. Bad luck, my lad, it's all over. The Brazilian, carried away by his fury, took the lid off his seething heart—the tender words which had counted for nothing, the promises of rendezvous unkept, the headaches, the sighs, the finger-tips swiftly raised to his lips when no one was looking . . . Two impassioned weeks of waiting and all for what? To hear himself labelled as a cheat. And by whom? By a prize bitch!

Monsieur Fred, at the next table, had seized his adversary by the lapel of his jacket.

"Let me go!" cried the man.

Everyone got up. Chairs toppled. Cards flew about. Slaps landed on cheeks. Glasses and ash-trays broke. Hearts too. Everyone shouted. French and Spanish swear-words were exchanged at top speed. Madame Paillaud gave a series of hysterical little cries.

Desperately, and with utter disregard for his safety, Monsieur Ménard hurled himself into the fray. He was immediately surrounded, jostled, manhandled and all but smothered.

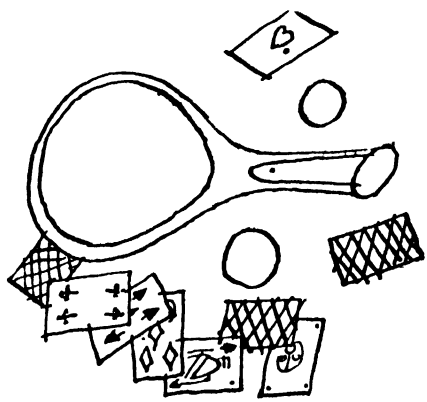
Dear God! The hotel's good name!

"Ladies and gentlemen . . ." gasped Monsieur Ménard. "Ladies and gentlemen . . ."

With a few simple words I could have put an end to the brawl.

"They seem to be disagreeing about something," said my wife. "What do you think it is?"

"I really don't know," I replied, smiling reassuringly.



30 July

Rain all day. Haven't put my nose out of doors. No one on the beach. A desert. The holiday-makers are appalled at the water coming from the skies . . .

I've just been reading through my diary. Monsieur Hulot appears on every page. He's my hero. His car. His devastating arrival. His skirmishes with Monsieur Fred and Monsieur Smutte. The farce with the canoe. The high jinks in the cemetery. What a wealth of unforgettable memories!

Hulot is still a complete stranger to me. We've never even exchanged a word. Has he any idea that I'm always there, close at hand? For two weeks my eyes have scarcely left him. He does all the things we'd really like to do on holiday. But, of course, we'd never have the courage.

Hulot . . . Shouldn't I somehow try to make him understand that, whatever happens, he can count on me? On two occasions already, I've deliberately kept my mouth shut—when Monsieur Ménard found the dirty footprints on the floor, and last night when the quarrel broke out among the card-players.

But I admit that's not enough. I shall have to find a more direct way of expressing my gratitude.

I don't really know how to set about it. I shall have to think about it.

2 August

Yesterday morning the sun came out and we caught our first glimpse of Hulot the horseman. Leather riding-boots and ancient, rusty spurs which tripped him up at every step. A riding crop which, whenever he tucked it under his arm, poked anyone behind in the face. No doubt about it. Hulot was going out riding.

Martine saw him coming from her window.

"Come in," she cried. "I'll be ready in a minute."

From her room we heard the first notes of the nostalgic song which deals with the weather in Paris.

Hulot climbed the steps to the villa. Five minutes later he emerged proudly behind Martine, with, instead of a riding crop, a long, broken candle. As soon as he realised his error, he rushed back and reappeared with his crop.

I don't know exactly what went on during the five minutes which Hulot spent in Madame Dubreuilh's sitting-room, but the candle provided a clue, and I can imagine the rest. Besides, I know the sitting-room. A

few days ago, Madame Dubreuilh invited my wife and me to tea.

The green wallpaper is covered with golden cornucopias. Engravings of the Monte Carlo Casino and the Sacré-Coeur in Montmartre face each other like opposing symbols of vice and virtue. There's an upright piano with bronze candlesticks, a low circular table and straight-backed Henry II chairs with carvings representing the four seasons (thus making four chairs). In addition, several arm-chairs and cushions, a pouf, and a photograph of Madame Dubreuilh, in a white frame.

Sweet-dishes, glass globes which fill with snow when shaken, some empty vases, a desert rose, a Turkish (or Japanese) dagger, a bronze clock and candlesticks on the mantelpiece, a carpet covered with the skins of a variety of animals.

It is with a sort of ferocious joy that I envisage Hulot transforming this museum of bourgeois atrocities into a corpse-strewn battlefield. I can see the vicious spurs ripping the carpet, the riding crop slashing Sacré-Coeur, knick-knacks quivering, the photograph sent flying. I can hear the crash of one sweet-dish after another.

What sombre struggles must have taken place to enable Hulot to emerge with a broken candle under his arm instead of a riding crop!

Hulot the Hun, scourge of revolting ornaments . . .

Martine clambered on to the back of a mule. All

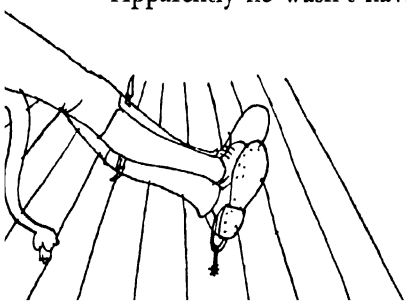
around, children were parading up and down on long-maned donkeys. Poor creatures. Heads bowed, decked out with jingling harnesses, they look the very picture of resignation. Morning and evening they trundle up and down the beach. They pass close by the old ladies with their knitting, descend as far as the rocks, and return alongside the jetty and across the sands. Sometimes, at the end of a ride, the children pat their necks.

I was sitting down—yes, that does occasionally happen—beside my wife, on top of a small bank. If Hulot was going riding, I didn't want to miss any of it.

Hulot went behind a cabin where presumably his mount was tethered, and reappeared, holding one end of the reins. Madame Dubreuilh arrived and stood by her niece who was waiting for Hulot. The latter raised his hat (a new hat, purchased the previous day, and very similar to the first) and bowed. As he bowed, he pulled gently on the reins. The reins gave a great jerk. He disappeared, doing a backwards pirouette.

'A splendid start,' I thought.

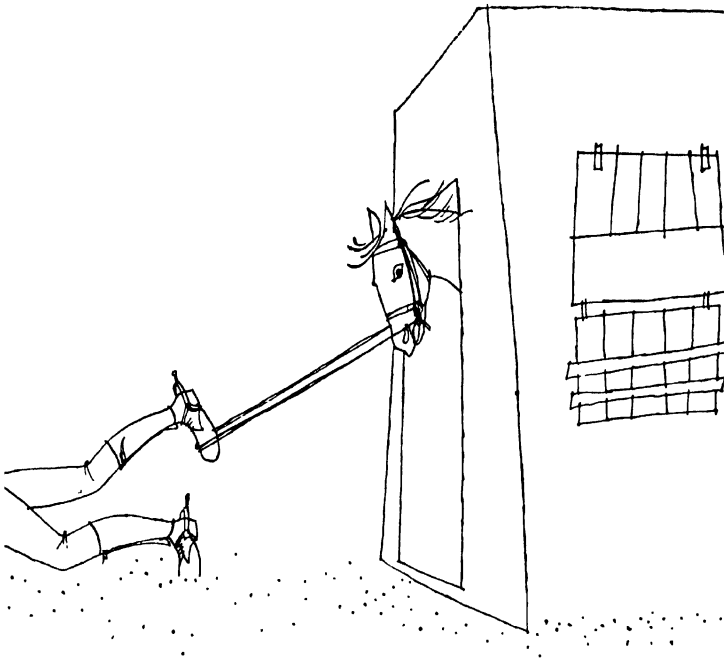
I presume that the horse was at the other end of the reins. Hulot was back a minute later, his hat askew. Apparently he wasn't having things all his own way.



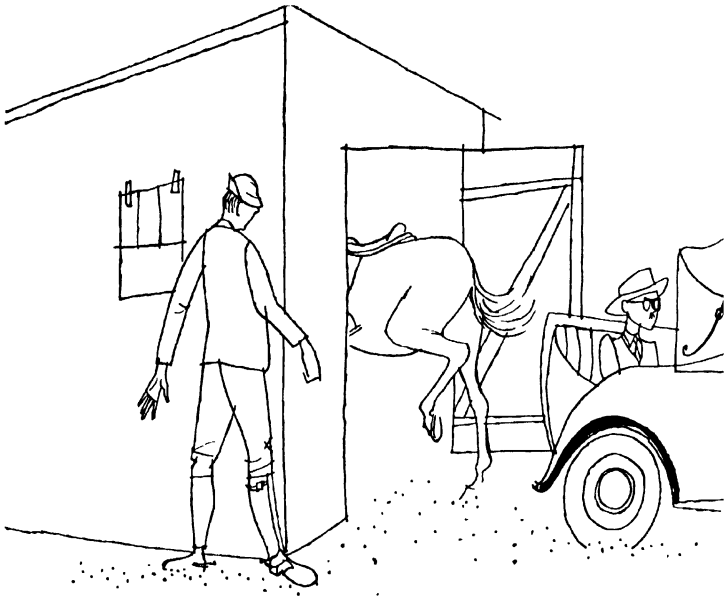
I don't quite know how it happened, but the next thing I saw was that he'd managed unwittingly to trap one of his feet between the reins which were trailing in the sand. Obviously a rather dangerous situation. Martine watched smiling. Madame Dubreuilh noticed nothing. Hulot raised his hat and bowed. The reins tautened. Off he went flying, once again to disappear behind the cabin, this time dragged by one foot.

Several times he attempted to complete this delicate manœuvre, and always with the same initial degree of optimism. But the horse was simply not interested. Hulot tried everything—flattery, caresses, arguments, threats. None of them worked. He got dragged across the sand, shaken to and fro and knocked about. At every turn his riding crop and spurs got in his way. He hopped on one leg, crawled on his belly, even tried surprise attacks—all without any success. I saw him trussed in the reins, trampled under foot, hanging from the side of the saddle—but still he got nowhere. Finally the horse lost what little patience it still possessed. Clearly it had no confidence left in its weird prospective passenger. Not very surprising either. Even the boldest steed would have backed away at the sight of those rusty spurs.

Which is precisely what it did. Head high, bridling and dragging on its bit, it backed away into the cabin. Once inside, it reared up and beat a tattoo with its hooves against the thin wooden walls.



The noise made Hulot lose his head. First he ran from one side of the cabin to the other, before finally closing and locking the door. Why? I haven't the least idea. Next he tried to calm the horse by whispering to it through the window. Probably he was trying to explain that there had been a slight misunderstanding but that everything would be all right in the end. The crash of hooves redoubled.



An open car was backing towards the rear of the cabin, with a man with a small moustache, small spectacles and a white hat sitting in the dicky.

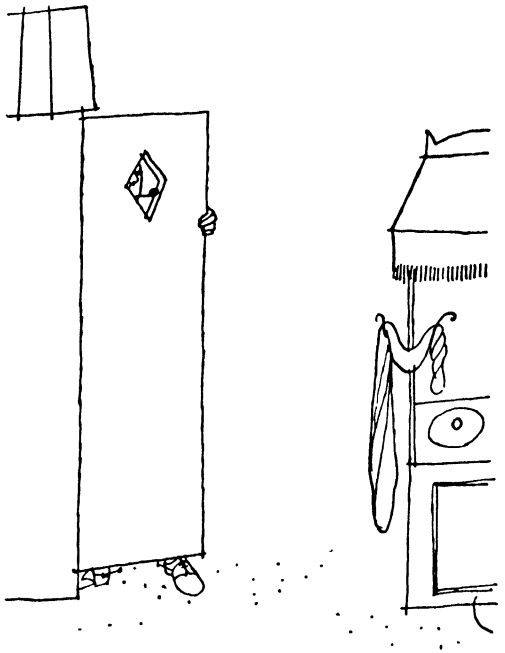
Foreseeing the danger, Hulot tried to get to the horse. He opened the cabin door, but shut it immediately. It was sheer chaos inside. The owner of the stables had chosen that moment to stroll down the beach. Catching sight of him, Hulot endeavoured to look completely at his ease, stuck his hands in his pockets, started to whistle. Meanwhile the noise got worse. The cabin began to shake like a ship in a hurricane.

Suddenly a particularly vicious series of kicks

brought down one of the wooden partitions, and the hindquarters of the horse appeared. Hulot approached, stretched out his hand, attempted to pat its belly. "There . . ." he murmured. "It's all right now . . ." The horse, however, behaved as if it had received a lash with the riding crop. What brutes horses are! A fearful blow from its rear hooves struck the back of the dicky seat and snapped it shut. All that one could see of the occupant was the rim of his white hat and a few inches of tie. He was underneath. In what condition, one wondered.

Hulot bent over the closed dicky. The sight of the protruding hat and tie brought home to him the fact that he had provoked yet another catastrophe. Throwing down his stick, he took to his heels.

But he didn't go far. He can never resist the tempta-



tion of a backward glance. He just has to see the consequences of his actions, even if from a distance; like a murderer who, it is claimed, always returns to the scene of his crime.

Accordingly, some fifty yards away, he swerved to the left and concealed himself behind a half-open cabin door. From there he could watch everything that was going on by peering through the small, diamond-shaped window.

The ice-cream merchant's cart stood close by, surrounded by children.

In a few minutes, as you may well imagine, there was a crowd round the car. The Colonel was there (where isn't he?) rapping out orders. The owner of the stables was trying to explain what had happened, but his anxiety to vindicate his horse's innocence made his story rather difficult to follow. The ice-cream merchant left his post to swell the throng. The cart tipped. And the roll of soft candy-floss . . .

Oh Lord, that roll of soft candy-floss!

Hulot saw it beginning to stretch. His knees trembled with nervous anticipation.

"Keep quite calm, everybody," said the Colonel. "The thing to do is to reappraise the situation."

It was very soon apparent that the dicky was hopelessly jammed. A defeatist suggested calling in the local garage. The Colonel rebuked him roundly.

"There's not a second to lose," he said.

A well-meaning man crawled under the car to see if, by chance, the stranger in the white hat had gone through the chassis. It would have saved a lot of trouble. But he hadn't.

"A spanner," someone suggested.

"A screwdriver."

"A hammer."

"A file."

"Quickly. He must be suffocating!"

Quickly? Easily said. Two men clambered on the hood and another on the boot. Others, lying under the car, talked animatedly of jacks and spare wheels.

New arrivals discussed the merits and defects of the vehicle, or made a tour of inspection, examining the dashboard, the tires, the lights, the steering wheel... Not a thought for the man trapped in the dicky. Wallowing in petrol fumes and pools of oil, he was probably at his last gasp.

Where did Hulot feature in this crisis?

He was shooting anguished glances at the roll of soft candy-floss, stretching, stretching, stretching . . . His foot was twisting frenziedly in the sand. Should he leave his hiding place or shouldn't he? Should he leap to the rescue of the candy-floss or not?

"Ah! A crowbar!" cried the Colonel.

"Come along. All together."

"Gently does it."

"Careful . . ."

"Heave-ho . . ."

The candy-floss was only ten inches from the ground. Five . . . Three. . . Two inches . . .

Hulot leapt forward, seized it, twisted it and stuffed it back on the hooks. At last! What a triumph to have got his hands on the elastic stuff which had defied him since his arrival. The rescue squad, scrambling about the tragic vehicle, was far too busy to pay him any attention. No one had any eyes for Hulot.

No one, that is, save for a solitary horse, his horse . . . It recognised its would-be tamer and advanced slowly. Hulot saw it in time. What was it after now? A final settling of accounts?

Scared out of his wits at the thought of a further encounter, Hulot turned and fled like a rabbit. Ignominious defeat! Farewell, the pleasures of horsemanship! The equestrian outing terminated in a frenzied dash for the hotel, with Hulot racing to take refuge under Monsieur Ménard's protective wing.

But I would have wagered anything that . . .

Yes, just as I thought. There, at the attic window, was the little round hat. Monsieur Hulot was surveying the scene!

Pierre, the young athlete, mastered the unco-operative horse, climbed effortlessly into the saddle and rode off to look for Martine.

"Any moment now . . ." said the ice-cream merchant.

"It's coming . . ." said the Colonel.

"A little more . . ."

"Got it!"

The dicky seat swung back. A dozen eyes, wide with horrified anticipation, peered into the interior. What would remain of the unfortunate occupant? Some of the ladies present turned their heads so as not to see. And from far off, Monsieur Hulot craned out of his window.

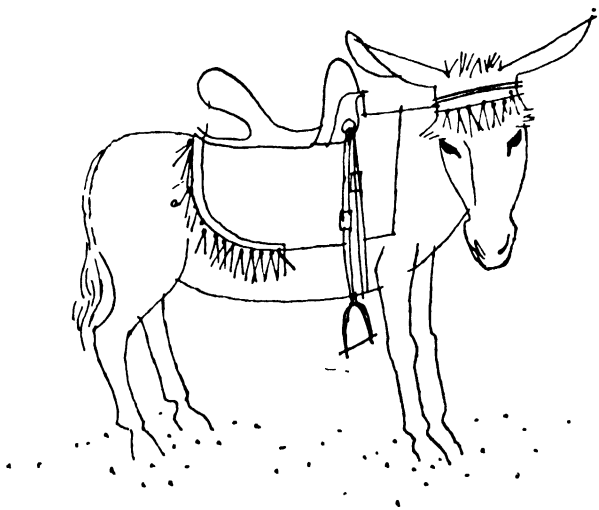
But Monsieur Hulot had no cause for alarm.

Under the anxious eyes of the members of the rescue squad, who scrutinised his every movement (*could* he still move?) the man with the small moustache and the small spectacles replaced his hat firmly on his head.

After which, he straightened his tie.

*

The chief topic of conversation was Monsieur Ménard's masked ball. In the beach-wear shop, which sells everything and, on occasions, hires out old theatrical costumes, women were trying on paper hats, wigs, false noses and beards. Wearing a sort of sombrero and dressed as a bacchante, Madame Smutte, arms akimbo, was pirouetting in front of the mirror. After she had done admiring herself she made her son, Régis, who kept yawning and glancing at the door, try on several costumes. Probably he was hoping that Hulot might come in.



Perhaps you're wondering how I came to be in the beach-wear shop at half-past eleven in the morning. Well, I'll tell you. My wife, my dear wife, was one of the bawling female throng. Throng? I'm exaggerating. There were only four altogether, Madame Smutte, the Colonel's wife, the Englishwoman and my wife. But they made enough noise for a dozen.

Several minutes earlier my wife had dragged me from the slope on which we had been sitting. Shaking out the skirt of her dress, which was stained with sand and bits of grass, she had declared:

"Come along now. I've got to choose a costume."

"You need me?"

"Of course I do. You'll have to give your opinion."

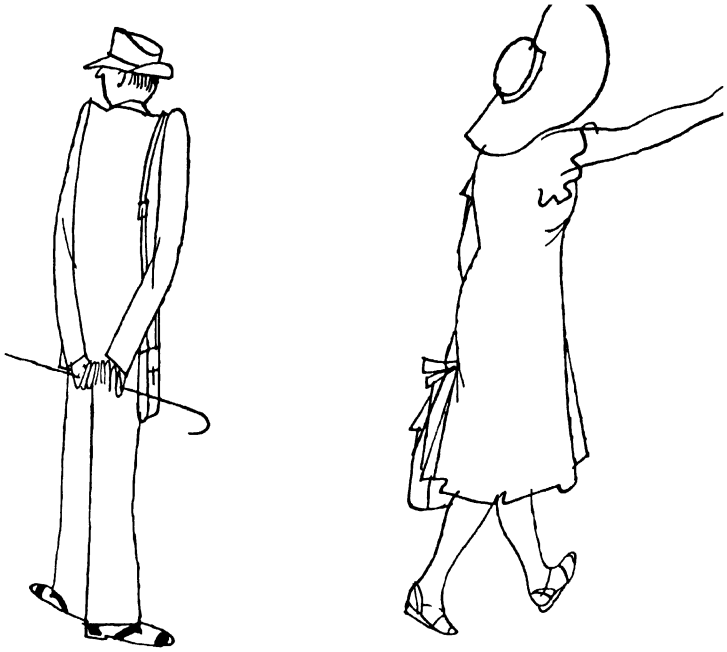
"All right, I'm coming."

She tried on a great number of costumes. None of them was quite to her liking, whilst each one filled me with more alarm than the last. (I saw her in turn as a veteran of the First Empire, a Spanish dancer, a geisha girl and a mythological shepherd.) She vacillated for a long time, stood on one foot and then the other and asked me for my opinion, which I would have hesitated to express. She ended up by purchasing three coloured postcards.

"They're to send to my cousins," she explained.

"Ah! Yes."

We walked out of the shop. The sun was shining. Yes, the sun.



"It's going to be a nice August," said my wife. "You should have taken your holidays later."

"If only I'd known."

Fishermen on the jetty were dragging in a large catch of struggling fish. Some sailing boats came into the harbour. The subsequent wash disturbed the anglers, who glared ferociously. Great numbers of bathers, taking advantage of the fine weather, well, the fairly fine weather, were splashing about in a calm sea.

Volley-ball nets, parasols, rakes, buckets and spades were everywhere. The beach was crammed. One

couldn't help asking oneself where all these people had come from. In normal weather, that's to say bad weather, one never saw them at all. Some were roasting stoically in the sun, taking comfort from the thought of the envious glances they would attract in buses and tubes. Others were dashing in all directions, building sandcastles and playing leapfrog.

A great regiment of them were hunting for shrimps near the black rocks.

"What a lot of people!" said my wife. "You can tell it's Sunday."

"Today?"

I came down to earth. Sunday? I'd lost track of the days.

"Of course, today! Haven't you noticed all the people? There's nowhere left to sit."

"No, nowhere."

The man in the white hat had climbed out of the dicky. The Colonel was holding forth on the accident, the art of riding, everything under the sun.

"The principles of horsemanship . . ." he was saying. "The stirrups should be neither too long nor too short . . . the bit firmly in place . . ."

The owner of the ice-cream stall was absent-mindedly serving a very young boy whose head didn't quite reach the counter. Two tiny hands, like those in a Punch and Judy show, appeared, put down the money, seized two ice-cream cones and disappeared.

Probably an old customer.

The small boy reappeared, his gaze fixed on his precious purchases, climbed some steps, raised the latch of a gate, pushed it and staggered across the sand. Fearful for his fragile cargo, I followed him with my eyes. His route was strewn with pitfalls.

But all the dangers melted away at the approach of a small boy concentrating on his cones. He didn't waver for a second, didn't spill a drop of ice-cream. One by one the traps gnashed their teeth in vain.

Without glancing either way, the child crossed the main road. Not a car in sight!

Once again I had the irresistible feeling that Fate co-operates with certain people. In a way, I couldn't help comparing what I had just seen with Hulot's miraculous tennis match. After all, weren't the same forces at work?

Why is it that Providence seems to wink at certain privileged human beings, even lend them a helping hand? And why is it that inanimate objects suddenly become these people's accomplices?

Probably the childish exploit I've just recounted doesn't seem particularly significant. After all, there's nothing extraordinary in carrying a couple of cones

across a beach without mishaps, even at that age.

But are you absolutely sure?

There was something about the little boy's bearing, his complete confidence, which suggested that he was being propelled forward by some external, omnipotent force. I was deeply impressed by the incident, as one is by the manifestation of all supernatural processes. I was awe-struck, in the same way as I had been at the description of Hulot's one-two-three tennis service.

The little boy reached the hotel entrance. Another child, slightly older, who had sent him on his errand, was standing waiting. The former, indifferent to the magnitude of his achievement, stopped and stared, open-mouthed with wonder, at the waiter who, from the top of a shaking ladder, was hanging faded streamers and lanterns round the porch.

In the child's hands the two cones shone like... (if I may be permitted the expression) flames of innocence.

3 August

Monsieur Hulot has absolutely conquered me, at any rate for the time being. Thanks to him, these holidays (which are drawing to a close) have taken on a new lease of life. Hulot is a daily surprise. He stands for fantasy, the unexpected. Miss Topping and the children share my opinion. Perhaps Martine too. Who cares if the others persist in turning up their noses?

I doubt whether my wife has even noticed Hulot. She's only interested in the daily routine, the life of the hotel, the faces of the people she's always nodding to, the walks, the periods spent sitting on the beach. It wouldn't occur to her that anything could disturb this peaceful scene. She's as unconscious of revolutions as a statue.

As for myself I'm delighted to say I've entered into my second childhood—in the best sense of the term, I might add. Judge for yourself. Do you know what happened only yesterday? I didn't follow my wife on her walk!

How did I manage it? It was really ridiculously easy. Sometimes obstacles look as high as mountains,

but once one's crossed them, one sees they were only molehills. Suddenly, as we were walking along the beach, I stopped. My wife went on alone. I sat down on the sand and took off my shoes and socks. Then I slipped out of my jacket, folded it neatly and laid it beside me. I felt as though a great weight had been taken off my mind. I had won back my independence.

An act of desperation? Maybe.

Close by, Hulot was playing ball with young Smutte and some other children. They were all laughing. When they had finished their game, they built sandcastles, bathed, flew a kite, or played leapfrog. I won't describe all the amusing little incidents. Seated on the sands, my hat over my eyes, I watched smiling. Hulot was always in the thick of it. You may have guessed: I was longing to join in. But I didn't. Audacity is one thing, anarchy another.

One day, however, I shall have to try and think up some way of expressing my gratitude to Hulot. Which means I shall have to make contact with him somehow. How shall I set about it?

My wife went as far as the jetty, then returned via the harbour and the sand dunes. From far off I distinguished the rocking motion of her rose-coloured parasol. When she was sixty yards away I quickly put on my shoes and jacket and picked up my stick. Then, for all the world like a pickpocket making a getaway, I sloped off between the parasols and tents. I reached the cabins. One was unoccupied. I entered.

I knelt down in the dark and stuffy interior.

Delicious suspense . . . Heart beating, years younger, fearing I know not what, I listened to the sound of my wife's approach. A shadow passed before me. I held my breath.

The cabin door opened. A little boy appeared. Because I was kneeling, our heads were on the same level. He looked me straight between the eyes.

I raised a finger to my lips and murmured:

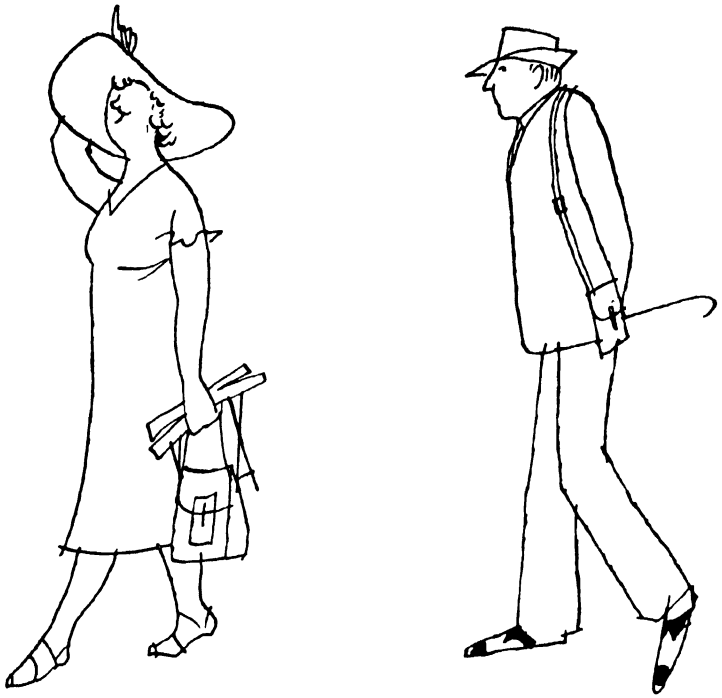
"Ssh!"

The little boy nodded his head. He seemed to be saying: "I understand." Then he closed the door. He knew he'd caught me in the middle of a game. As he'd often been caught himself.

The sound of my wife's steps receded.

I pushed open the door gently and left the cabin. My wife was only a few yards ahead. I hurried after her. All went well. Without a hitch I tacked on behind. I'm not unique, you know. The French beaches are full of queer little coves like me. And other beaches, too. We're all neatly dressed, all nonchalant, all silent, all a little mad. Our white trousers are slightly too large. Our jackets are slightly too tight at the waist. Often we wear a stiff collar. And we sport a light cane.

I readjusted my hat. I crossed my hands behind my back. At every step I flicked the bottoms of my trousers with the end of my stick. I raised my hat to Madame Smutte.



In front of me the rose-coloured parasol twirled like a mechanical toy. My wife had noticed nothing at all. I felt pleased. Not only with things in general, but also—to be strictly truthful—with myself.

And so, one behind the other, resuming our proper place in the landscape (whose pattern for a moment I'd destroyed), we reached the hotel. My wife turned round.

"I'm a bit tired," she said.

"I'm not surprised," I replied. "We really did go the long way round today . . ."

4 August

At nine o'clock yesterday evening, just when the masked ball was due to begin, we heard on the radio that the country was threatened with a serious internal crisis.

"In a few moments you will be able to hear an appeal to the country by Monsieur Durrieux, Minister of State."

Both Monsieur Smutte, who was re-reading some letters, and Monsieur Fred moved their chairs closer to the radio. Madame Fred, who had already started to change, tiptoed up behind her husband and clapped a red fez on his head. Monsieur Fred, who was anxiously awaiting the beginning of the speech, snatched the fez from his head and hurled it at the floor. Madame Fred hastily climbed the stairs. If that was her husband's attitude, very well . . . She would just get on with her own costume . . . Some people . . .

Monsieur Durrieux started to speak.

"Fellow citizens, this is a critical moment in our history . . ."

Well, well. The festivities damped before they had even begun!

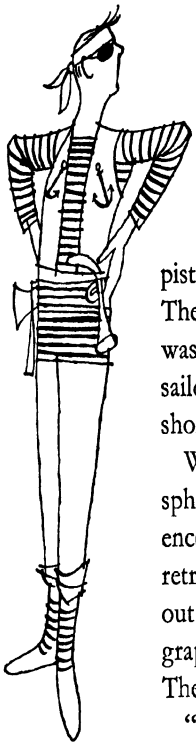
The dining-room had been transformed into a ballroom: a few clusters of leaves hanging despondently from the skirting, some paper garlands and blue and red paper lanterns from the previous year, a gramophone set up on a table. A middle-aged lady was sitting on a bench between her two children, one dressed as Pierrot, the other as Columbine. Otherwise the room was empty. Madame Smutte came in with Régis. She was wearing a mask and he was dressed as a hussar. Not a sound. Not a note of music. It needed a few more gay spirits before the fun could get under way. Ten minutes passed. A quarter of an hour. The children looked desperate, twisting the folds of their costumes. They'd been promised dancing, noise, laughter, fun and confetti. Instead they'd got queer clothes which didn't fit, and Monsieur Durrieux was doing his best to make it perfectly clear that there was no question of having a good time this evening.

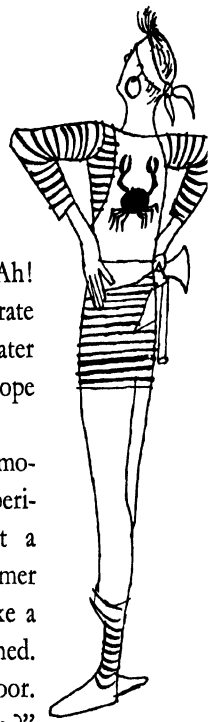
In place of his customary scowl, the waiter was wearing a painfully expansive smile. It gave the impression that the corners of his mouth were held in place by invisible pins. Behind the cash-desk, Monsieur Ménard, wearing a Napoleonic hat, was also smiling. As usual, his nose was in his cash-book.

"The intention of the Government, of which I am a member, is to exercise the full responsibility vested in it by the electors . . ."

Everyone was sitting round the wireless—the intellectual, the old ladies, the coquette and the Brazilian (reconciled by the intervention of the Colonel). Even the English couple were present. They kept glancing out of the corner of their eyes at Monsieur Ménard's hat. Probably they were wondering if this was how the French always celebrated the memory of their Emperor.

A tall, one-eyed pirate jerked across the hall. Hulot! Extremely short trousers, a patch over one eye, a red turban, an enormous black paper crab on his back, two





pistols and a cutlass in his belt. Ah! The plot was thickening! Our pirate was going to shake up these calm-water sailors. A momentary glimmer of hope shone in Monsieur Ménard's eyes.

When Hulot sensed the general atmosphere of despair, he seemed to experience a moment of doubt. Beat a retreat? Never! He took a streamer out of his pocket and hurled it like a grappling iron. Nothing happened. The streamer expired on the tiled floor.

"What precisely then is wrong?" droned Monsieur Durrieux. "From the pessimistic tone of the reports submitted to me . . ."

Hulot crossed the hall, entered the ballroom and hurled another streamer. His pockets were crammed with them. The streamer got caught up in a garland and hung from it. Young Smutte escaped from his mother and copied Hulot's example. A second streamer hung beside the first.

"What about a walk?" suggested my wife. "It's a nice evening."

"A walk?"

"Oh, just a short one."

"But . . . the ball?"

"What ball?"

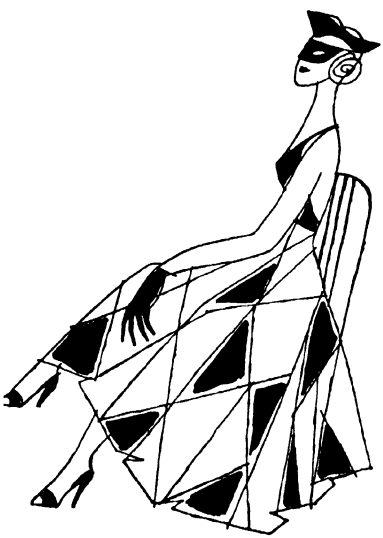
Martine stood at the door, bathed in moonlight, cloaked and masked. Taken aback by the sight of everyone sitting round the wireless in their ordinary clothes, she appeared surprised, confused, saddened. She was about to withdraw, heavy-hearted, when . . .

. . . the pirate put a waltz on the gramophone. Martine entered, eyes lowered behind her mask, and hurried across the hall into the dining-room. Hulot walked up to her and bowed, pistols and cutlasses rattling. Ah, madame, here's a gentleman pirate at your service. Put a brave face on it. The assembly under the lanterns is certainly not a particularly brilliant one, but the show must go on. Pretend it's a sumptuous party at the home of a Louisiana planter. A thousand chandeliers! A thousand guests! Negro servants in red and black liveries, Count So-and-so and Baron Thingummy, six orchestras, whole oxen roasting on spits . . . Imagine the sparkle of jewels, the champagne in the alcoves, the vistas of flowers, and pretend you are there. There are two of you—enough to make a couple.

Martine and her cavalier comported themselves like guests at a magnificent reception. A chair? You're too kind. Which one would you prefer? The chairs were ranged along the four walls. All, or very nearly all, were vacant. This one? A little nearer the orchestra? Let's sit here, by the open window. We'll be able to breathe the night air as it blows in across the lawns. And now what would you like? Shall we talk? Or listen to the music?

A dance? Why not? Hulot got to his feet and gave a low, sweeping bow. Martine put her hand in his. A pair of tattooed arms encircled her body. But everyone knows that you're safe in the arms of a sailor.

Martine's back was bare, and her corsage was secured by a velvet neck-band. Hulot's right hand hovered hesitantly up and down the unfamiliar back. Where could he put it? Inspiration suddenly came to his aid. Crooking his index finger, he hooked it on the velvet neck-band.



They danced.

"Are you coming?" said my wife.

"I'm coming."

"I would like to appeal to those who are always only too eager to embark on destructive

criticisms of our efforts," continued Monsieur Durrieux, "to suggest a new solution . . ."

Monsieur Smutte and Monsieur Fred went into a huddle, then closed the door of the dining-room. The gramophone had been interfering with the Minister of State's speech. The waiter relaxed his smile and Monsieur Ménard removed his little hat. The English couple still hadn't grasped the significance of his historic headgear. Nevertheless the hotel had been recommended to them.

Farewell, trumpets and musicians. Farewell, Tom, Dick and Harry. The Beach Hotel Ball had been a complete flop, the first casualty of the new political crisis.

"Economies amounting to three hundred and fifty thousand million francs are indispensable . . ."

Hulot pulls a streamer out of his pocket and tries to throw it, but the end of the streamer is too small to get hold of. Perhaps that's one of the economies Monsieur Durrieux has insisted on.

I follow my wife out on to the porch, but she doesn't hear me. Lost in the shadows, still thinking of Hulot, I stand waiting for her to lead the way. Instead she goes back into the hotel and peers round. She's looking for me. It shows what sort of place I occupy in her life.

She catches sight of me.

"Ah! There you are."

She shuts the door and moves up ahead of me, one hand on her hat, muffled up in her shawl.

"Excuse me," she says.

A light wind flutters the ends of my scarf. We skirt the hotel, passing in front of the dining-room windows. I stop for a moment to stand on tiptoe.

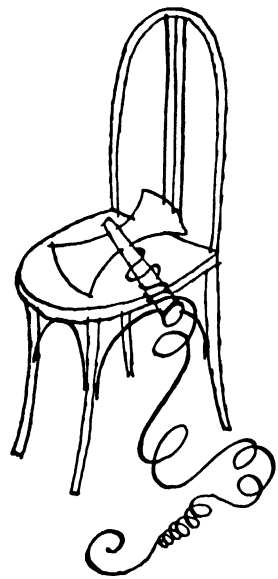
The one-eyed pirate and the young girl are still dancing a slow waltz. Just the other side of Martine's ear, beside one of her coiled plaits, I catch a glimpse of the one-eyed brigand. From this distance it seems to me to reflect the last glimmers of a fading dream. Nearby, young Smutte, his epaulettes bobbing, is dragging little Columbine round the floor. As for young Pierrot, sitting dangling his legs, what can he be thinking about?

Well done, Hulot . . . Think of the loving care Martine expended on her costume. (I can see her singing as she stitched it up.) Think of the time she spent on her hair and make-up. And look at her nails, how beautifully manicured they are. Essential that those long preparations should not have been wasted. You did bravely not to abandon the shipwrecked evening, but to stand on the bridge to the bitter end. Young girls appreciate that sort of thing. Dance on! Laugh and play the buffoon! Brandish your pistols! Cover the floor with confetti! Offer your partner an iced drink! Stick at it! Martine will be grateful to you.

You've saved her evening.

*

I wander off into the night. The beach is asleep. Only the sea is restless. Soon the music will stop, for the old ladies mustn't be disturbed. Behind the hotel shutters the lights go on and off. Somehow they look like the signals of a distant ship.



5 *August*

Six miles from the beach, at the end of a bumpy road, there's a quiet little wood where we go for our annual picnic. It's the one occasion on which we all 'go rural'. One needs to get out of the groove, even if, like Christmas, it comes but once a year.

The Colonel organises the picnic as if it were a large-scale manœuvre. When the great day comes everyone dresses for the part. The women put on their garden-party skirts, the men wear denims and a stout pair of shoes. We never know what may happen. The spirit of adventure throbs in every heart. A thrilling expedition! We're ready to take on anything—crossing ditches, crawling through undergrowth, clambering over the lower branches of trees, sitting on the grass. Who knows? We may even see a hedgehog, or a mushroom (which, very wisely, we won't pick). If fate takes a hand, we may even catch sight of an adder's tail disappearing into the bracken. In that case we'll have our work cut out calming the womenfolk.

The departure is scheduled for half-past nine. At ten o'clock, there's still no one ready. Something

always gets lost—a corkscrew or an umbrella. Four cars are drawn up in front of the hotel. Women dash up and down the staircases. Packets and parcels multiply. Monsieur Smutte explains sadly why he can't come:

"I might be wanted on the telephone . . ."

Madame Smutte will be keeping her husband company. She says to Régis:

"Now promise you'll be a good boy."

"Yes, mother."

Madame Dubreuilh and Martine were there. Also the Freds, the Colonel and his wife, Miss Topping, the intellectual, Madame Paillaud. The Colonel called the roll. Everyone replied: "Present!"

"Madame Verdaz and Madame Paillaud: Monsieur Bresson's car . . . Madame Girard: Monsieur Reynald's car . . . Madame and Mademoiselle Dubreuilh: Monsieur Hulot's car . . . Hulot!"

Hulot wasn't there.

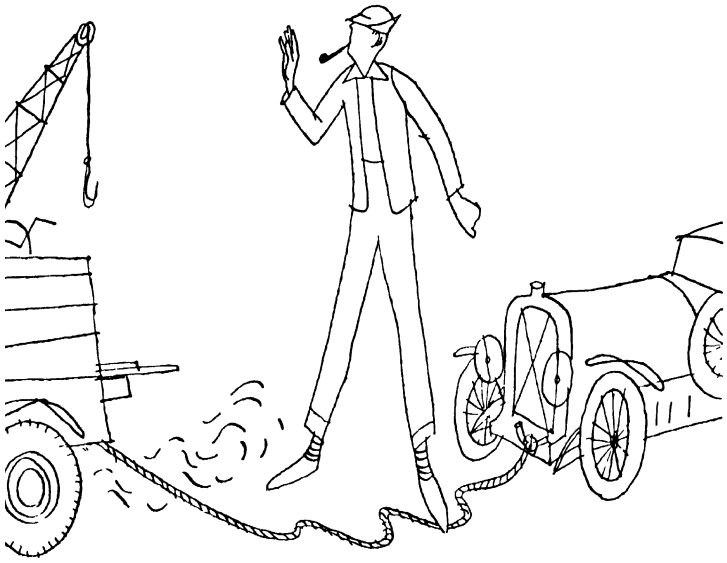
"Hulot!" repeated the Colonel.

No answer.

"Excuse me," said the Colonel. "My plan was worked out to the last detail. But technical hitches lie outside my control. I——"

A mechanic from the local garage appeared on the scene. He was red with amazement and black with axle-grease.

"Hi!" he cried. "There's a chap just fallen in the canal. Yes, down there. I think he's one of your mob.



Tall, with a pipe and hat. Looks a bit . . . a bit . . . well, you know what I mean. He's a queer customer, I tell you. Had a spot of trouble with that car of his. Carburetor, I guess. Nothing serious. I gave him a tow down the towpath. Then phut! Tow-rope snapped. I got out to speak to him. If you ask me, he'd jammed on the brakes. I mean a tow-rope doesn't just snap like that. But couldn't make him understand. Seems to me he's a bit . . . Anyway, I fix a new tow-rope and get back into the van. Then I rev up. The car door slams. 'Good! He's in,' I say to myself. I mean, wouldn't you? I let in the clutch. Then, stap me! There's a loud splash, and a lot of shouting. I slam on the brakes. 'Suppose that's my chap,' I say to myself. And it was! You know what he'd done? I

swear to you, he's a bit . . . Well, as I'd let in the clutch, seems he was standing on the tow-rope, and when the tow-rope tightened, he shot off. Catapulted, if you get me. They say he went straight up in the air, pipe and gloves and all, and landed smack in the canal! Still, he managed to get out. But I tell you he's a bit . . . well, what was I saying? But if you're waiting for him . . . I mean, he'll have to dry off. And I'll have to check that carburetor. It looks half-drowned too . . ."

"Right!" said the Colonel. "Since Hulot's car's out of action, two passengers will have to stand down. Any volunteers?"

"Me!" cried Miss Topping.

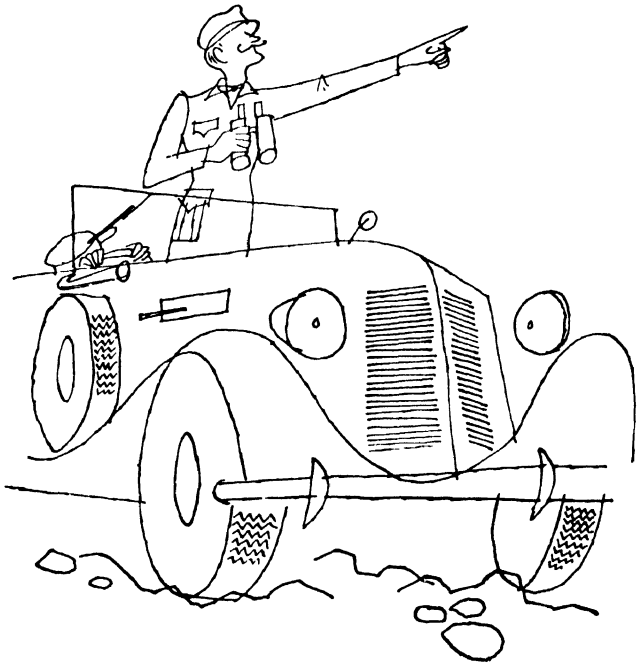
There was relief in her voice. She'd found herself next to the intellectual, who had already started indoctrinating her.

Miss Topping got down and Martiné took her place. The intellectual continued from where he had left off:

". . . legislation must cede the place to doctrinal inspiration. In a word . . ."

Madame Dubreuilh stayed behind with Miss Topping. They would come on later with Hulot. Monsieur Ménard appeared at the porch. He was smiling. Now there'd be a bit of peace! At any rate till dinner! The Colonel, standing up in the leading car, unfolded his staff map. Then stretching one arm forward, he shouted:

"Direction . . . North!"



The armoured column set off to a fluttering of handkerchiefs.

"Good-bye!"

"See you this evening!"

"Be good!"

"Have a good time!"

Twenty minutes later we reached the bumpy road. The little wood came into view.

"Steady now . . . Halt!" cried the Colonel as we reached the outskirts.

Soon it was clear that Monsieur Hulot's car would

not be joining us. Martine was getting anxious about the fate of her aunt. So long as there hadn't been an accident . . . I felt sad. Another lost opportunity.

We made a quick inspection of our site. Nothing had changed. The women laid out the table-cloths. We all marked our napkin rings to avoid confusion. Then we sat in a circle in the clearing. Sardines, hard-boiled eggs, cold meat, no vegetables (too difficult to carry), cheese and fruit. The Colonel lined up all the dirty crockery and methodically sliced the melon. His wife upset oil down her blue dress.

"A little excursion gives one quite an appetite," declared Monsieur Fred.

It hadn't given me an appetite. And, worst of all, I'd forgotten my drops.

"Don't overburden your stomach," said my wife. "You never know what all this fresh air may do to you . . ."

On the stroke of four, the rain came down. The Colonel sounded the retreat. Hurriedly we piled everything into the cars, pulled down the hoods and started the windscreen-wipers.

"Direction . . . South!"

And off we went.

In front of the porch of the Beach Hotel, we found Madame Dubreuilh and Miss Topping. They were getting out of a superb leather-upholstered coupé glistening with chromium. An elegant young man with a slight moustache was at the wheel.

"I don't know how to thank you, monsieur," said Madame Dubreuilh, as the young man stood gazing at Martine. "I do feel much better now. Your car is really most comfortable. Thank you again."

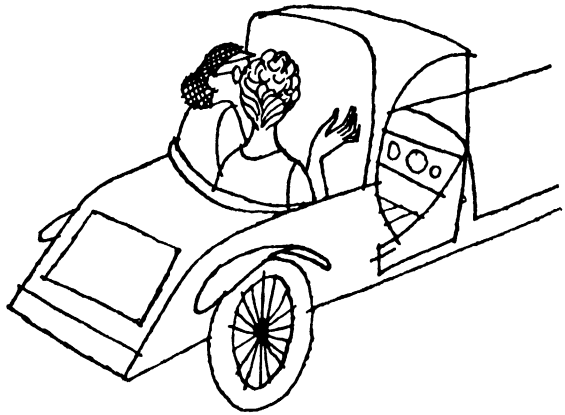
"Not at all, madame."

"Thanks!" said Miss Topping. "G'd-bye!"

*

"Tea? Hot water and lemon?"

"I'd love a cup of tea," replied Madame Dubreuilh. "I'm all in."



"Wherever did you get to?" demanded Martine. "We were waiting for you."

"My dear, please don't talk about it."

"But . . ."

"Believe me, your poor aunt's been through the mill," said Madame Dubreuilh, sugaring her tea.

"Oh! It was very funny!" cried Miss Topping.

"For you!" replied Madame Dubreuilh.

"Yes!"

"But tell me what happened!" said Martine.

"Oh, Martine, what a picnic! When Monsieur Hulot's car arrived, Miss Topping and I both noticed that the front seat was wet, don't ask me why. Anyway, we got into the dicky seat. The hood being up, we naturally couldn't see much of the countryside, but even so, those little villages in the distance, the rooftops, the clock towers . . ."

"Very pretty," said Miss Topping, in excellent spirits.

"Really," continued Madame Dubreuilh, "one would never have believed one was so close to the sea. Then suddenly the rear wheel on my side punctured. A nuisance, but not fatal. I mean nowadays there are garages at every corner. We came to a halt at the side of a ditch. I must admit Monsieur Hulot couldn't have been more considerate. He kept on apologising and absolutely insisted we should keep our seats while he changed the wheel. Miss Topping and I were having a fascinating conversation about English pastry. And I might add I was very pleased to find how much of the English I'd learned at school I still remembered. Particularly expressions used a lot in London society like 'how do you do?' and 'I beg your pardon . . .' "

"But, Aunt, what about the wheel?"

"The wheel? Oh yes, the wheel. Well, Monsieur Hulot fitted a jack or something under the back of the car. There was a dreadful grinding. Then, just imagine! Miss Topping rose slowly in the air and dropped right back again. 'Ah!' I said to myself, 'something's going on under the car.' No sooner had this idea occurred to me than my own seat shot up. It was like being in a dentist's chair. Just when I'd got high enough up to be able to admire a really lovely stretch of country, it subsided again. Monsieur Hulot came over to us and raised his hat twice, which seemed a strange thing to do, but I was having such an interest-

ing discussion with Miss Topping that I hardly noticed anything else. A little later the car started vibrating like mad, but then those old motors are like that. 'At last we're off,' I said to myself. We were going downhill and pretty fast. 'We shan't be too late,' I thought. After all, if one's got any breeding, one always likes to be punctual, particularly on an outing. Don't you agree?"

"I do, madame," said Monsieur Ménard.

Madame Dubreuilh sipped her tea. It was clear she was weighing her words in order to produce the most dramatic effect. The distant look in her eyes testified to the ordeal she'd recently undergone.

"Oh, Martine, what a picnic," she continued. "There we were driving quietly along, admiring the countryside, discussing the British way of life, and all the time, without knowing it, we were in mortal danger."

"In mortal danger!" echoed Martine incredulously.

Everyone was mute with horror. Madame Dubreuilh took another sip of her tea. Then she patted her niece's hand affectionately.

"You'd very nearly seen your aunt for the last time."

"But, Aunt . . ."

"While the car hurtled on, and Miss Topping and I chatted away, who do you think we suddenly saw at the side of the road? *At the side of the road.*"

"Who?"

"Monsieur Hulot!"

"Monsieur Hulot?"

"Yes, my dear."

"But it couldn't have been . . ."

"Yes. Monsieur Hulot. Why wasn't he at the wheel? I've no idea. The car must have set off without him. But if so, how on earth had he got there? Was it a bad joke? Or an accident? Had he jumped out while the car was in motion? Anyway, he was no longer with us. There was no way of stopping the car and, as I told you, we were going downhill. Our speed was increasing every second. It was a miracle our hats didn't blow off. Any moment we could have crashed into a tree or careered off the road."

"How dreadful!" everyone murmured.

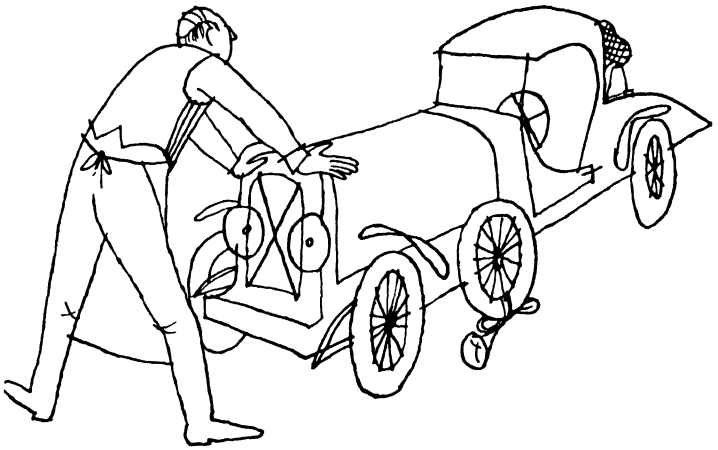
"A veritable death-trap," remarked Monsieur Ménard.

"What happened next?" demanded Martine.

"What happened next? The car shot through a huge gateway and up a long drive. A splendid mansion came into view. Through the trees I could see fountains and ivy-covered statues . . ."

"And the car?" demanded Martine.

"Ah, yes! The car! Still hurtling on. Monsieur Hulot had dashed after us through the gates, but two enormous dogs bounded out at him from behind a thicket. Monsieur Hulot turned and ran like the wind. We lost sight of him. Meanwhile the car was still going, jolting up and down on a flat tire. The spare wheel on the hood had come off its hook and, hanging by a bit of wire, was jogging along at the side.



And you know how the horn is fitted on the spare wheel? Well, every time the wheel went round it squeezed the horn which gave a loud 'peep'! What a car! And all done without a driver! Then we heard gunfire! Yes, gunfire! We were being shot at!"

"Without any warning?" asked the Colonel's wife.

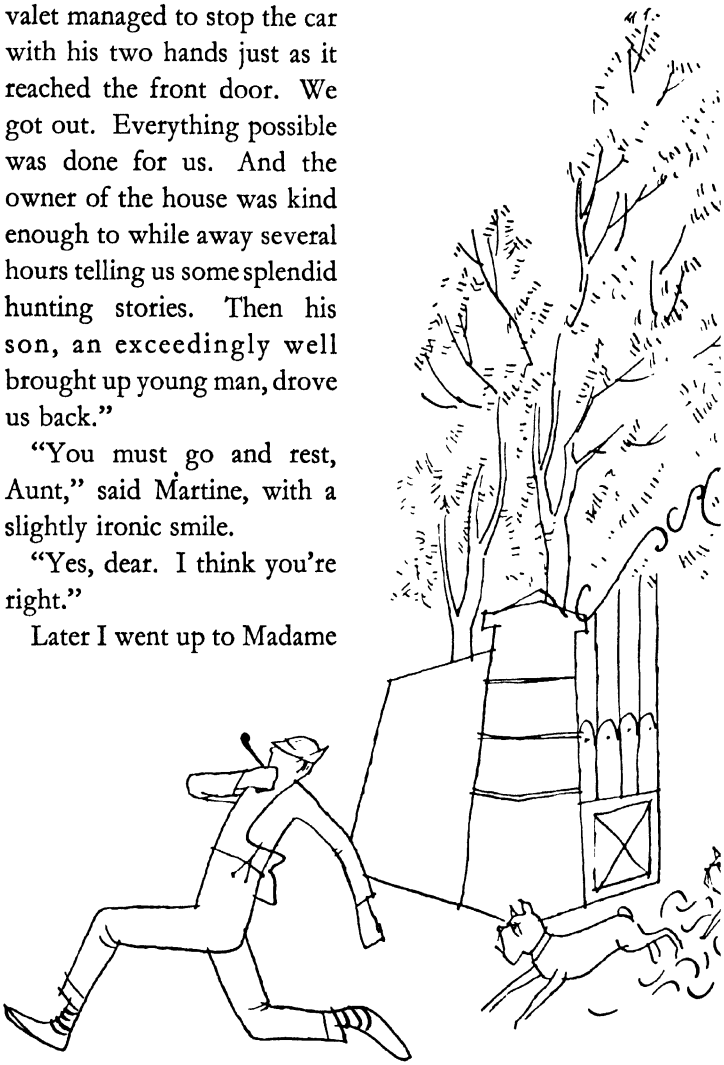
"Without a word of warning. I agree we were trespassing. But even so, to open fire . . . What was going on? I'll tell you. We were in the grounds of a splendid eighteenth-century manor. The owner, mistaking the sound of the horn for a duck, was blazing away in our direction. Later we had the pleasure of meeting this gentleman, really quite delightful. You know the type—courteous, witty, refined, an aristocrat to his finger-tips. But unfortunately he was afflicted with

hereditary gout. In consequence he was forced to do his shooting from a wheel-chair which his valet pushed round the terrace. Anyway, our little misunderstanding was soon cleared up. The valet managed to stop the car with his two hands just as it reached the front door. We got out. Everything possible was done for us. And the owner of the house was kind enough to while away several hours telling us some splendid hunting stories. Then his son, an exceedingly well brought up young man, drove us back."

"You must go and rest, Aunt," said Martine, with a slightly ironic smile.

"Yes, dear. I think you're right."

Later I went up to Madame



Dubreuilh and asked her in as casual a tone as I could muster:

"But what happened to Hulot?"

"I've no idea, monsieur. The last I saw of him he was dashing headlong down the drive pursued by two slavering mastiffs."

*

No Hulot. It was a sad end to our holidays. I'd especially wanted him to be with us on this, our last evening. It might have helped me to believe that these holidays were not just a legend, that they really had happened and that for some of us they would last for ever.

But Monsieur Hulot was otherwise engaged. He was dashing across the countryside with a pack of hounds on his heels.

The meal was funereal. The wireless announced that the weather would be changeable with bright intervals (I couldn't have cared less: we were leaving the next day). The Colonel, commenting on Madame Dubreuilh's adventures, insisted that it showed that French chivalry was not dead (this for the benefit of the foreigners present). After which his wife upset the salt-cellar and he declared, at the top of his voice, that she was a fool. The Brazilian, who hadn't got what he wanted, devoured the coquette with his eyes. It was this evening or never for him. In my opinion, never.

The coquette was already dreaming of suitors to come, for, like us, the Brazilian was leaving in the morning.

My wife forced me to take a double dose of drops in order not to have to pack a nearly empty bottle.

During the course of our last evening walk I overheard the Colonel explaining to a stranger the details of the firework display he'd organised for the Fête. I felt a sudden upsurge of hope. Something told me that Hulot still had a card up his sleeve and that before the evening was out he'd play it. The barking of dogs sounded in the distance. It grew fainter. Then louder. Hulot and his mastiffs?

Everywhere was quiet again. I loitered a few moments in front of the hotel porch.

"Let's get to bed," said my wife. "We've a tiring journey ahead of us."

"I'm coming."

'Well, that's that,' I thought. 'It's too late now. Hulot won't be coming back. I'll never see him again. And he'll never know how grateful I am to him.'

Most of the guests (many of whom would be leaving with us in the morning) had already retired to their rooms. The waiter was standing, arms crossed over his napkin, next to the only table still laid—Hulot's. It wasn't the first time he'd had to wait up like that. He was muttering under his breath, and yawning. Roll on the end of the holidays!

The first explosions, fairly mild ones, came just as I was starting to climb the stairs.

"Where are you going?" called out my wife.

I didn't reply. The unexpected had happened. And was still happening. Perhaps I had a last chance.

Wild flashes streaked across the night sky. I looked up.

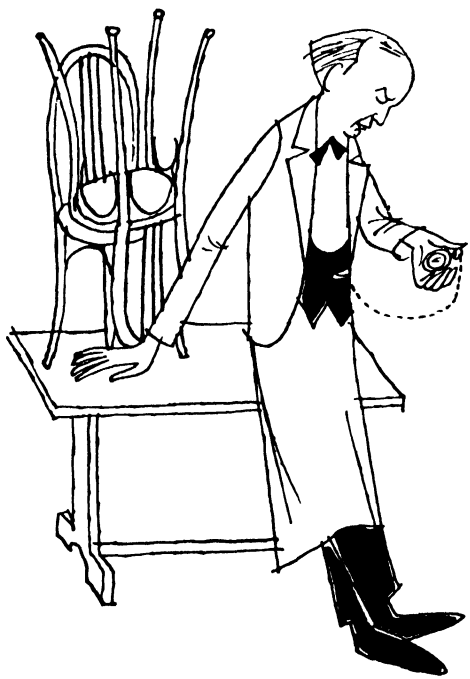
"The fireworks!" I shouted.

"The fireworks!" repeated a few other spectators.

"But they weren't tonight!"

"No one warned us . . ."

"I thought it was the fifteenth of August!"



"But this is dangerous. They're going off in all directions."

"It must be an accident!"

An accident! The very idea started a stampede. Rockets came skimming across the ground. Whoever was in charge evidently didn't know his job. I couldn't quite see where it was all coming from. But the cascades of crackling sparks, the chaos and the increasing uproar made me think irresistibly of Monsieur Hulot. Who else could have hit upon the delightful idea of a premature firework display? Had he taken refuge in the firework shed to get away from the dogs? Then, checking his whereabouts, he must have struck a match . . .

It requires a more Homeric pen than mine to describe what followed. In a trice the town and the beach were ablaze with dazzling streams of multi-coloured sparks. Catherine wheels spun like blazing hoops. Crates of squibs went off like broadsides. Rockets spiralled in all directions, striking down anybody and everybody in their path. This was the real thing all right—a surprise performance on a grand scale. Brilliant white set-pieces lit up, went out and lit up again. The beacon at the end of the jetty looked pale and pathetic in comparison. In fact one could scarcely see it. If there were any fishermen out at sea, they must have thought the town was on fire.

The merciless bombardment continued. Late-night strollers ran for shelter. On the first floor of the hotel

a window was hoisted like a flag, and the Colonel appeared in night-shirt and night-cap, field-glasses in hand.

"Everyone to his post!" he yelled.

He had been dreaming of ancient (and probably imaginary) campaigns. He clearly hadn't grasped the fact that he was witnessing the tail-end of his own fire-work display.

"They shall not pass!" he added, turning to his wife who had run up with a scarf.

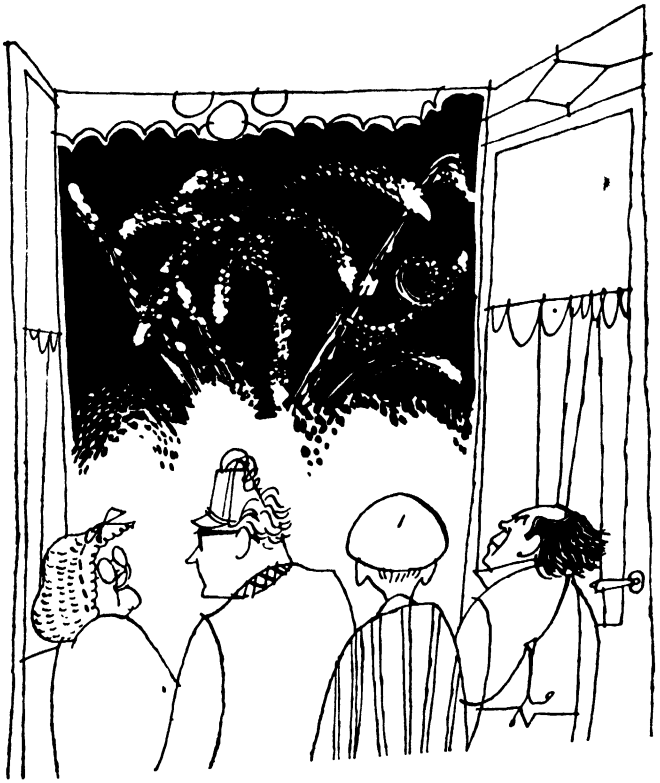
A rocket grazed the Colonel's cheek. He slammed the window. It exploded inside the room. The window reopened and smoke poured out. The Colonel's blackened face reappeared. His hair was standing on end. He had lost his night-cap and much of his night-shirt. Leaning out, he roared:

"This way, my lads!"

A fire-cracker went off under his nose. He fell backwards.

Cries went up on all sides. Eyes starting out of their heads, holiday-makers scattered right and left, squibs bursting under their feet. I pictured Hulot down there in the heart of the furnace, vainly trying to extinguish the ever-increasing flames. A scorched Hulot! A trembling Hulot! A Hulot desperately searching for a watering-can!

I went back into the hall. The guests had assembled in their nightwear, still half asleep. The men were talking loudly and the women jabbering about earthquakes



and cataclysms. Monsieur Smutte had put on his son's helmet by mistake. Young Smutte and Miss Topping were laughing. The Colonel arrived in his dressing-gown, his face black, his field-glasses slung round his neck. He was immediately surrounded. "What's going on, Colonel?" He rapped out some instructions.

"Quickly! To horse!" he barked at Monsieur Smutte, recognising the helmet.

Orders were issued. A watch was kept on the emergency exits and the water taps—in case fire broke out! Above all: no panic! Monsieur Ménard appeared in a dressing-gown which had once been crimson. He turned on the lights. As he pressed the switch in the gramophone room, he inadvertently started up Monsieur Hulot's favourite record which was still on the turntable. The music burst out like a thunderclap. Deafened by the trumpets on one side and the resounding crashes of the fireworks on the other, the guests staggered backwards and forwards, collided with each other, clung to each other, laughed and wept. Many were no longer recognisable. Monsieur Fred, clad in his green pyjamas, eyes swollen with sleep, was writing out his last will and testament. Madame Paillaud was crossing herself and intoning a *miserere*. The Brazilian, trembling in every limb, was babbling about evacuating the women. The coquette was too distraught to mind about being seen in her hair-curlers. The waiter was knocking back a large cognac. Monsieur Ménard was desperately trying to get the telephone to work.

They looked like the tenants of a block of flats, scared silly but thankful to be still alive, sheltering in the cellars during a bombardment.

"Something odd's going on," said my wife.

I went out again.

The firework display was at its height. The whole area between the rocks and the yellow sea was alive with rockets, crackers and squibs. The starless sky

was a mass of golden rain. Ignoring the danger, I stood close to the parapet, bathed in the glare, stunned with the noise. And I laughed myself hoarse. When the set-piece above the jetty went off I had the illusion that the sparks were forming an enormous outline of Monsieur Hulot, of a gigantic and celestial Hulot, of a Hulot who inspired me with terror and admiration.

Paris: 6 August

Half-past six.

Home again. No sooner had my wife entered the front door than she sighed and said that despite everything it was nice to be back. She opened the windows and took off the dust sheets, tested the taps and made sure that the moths hadn't got into the wardrobe (they'd have had to penetrate a solid wall of mothballs). Then she turned on the gas and electricity.

Relations dropped in. Yes, thank you, we had a good time.

Office on Monday, my lad.

As always, I was weighed down with regrets. But that awful end-of-the-holiday feeling wasn't as bad as usual. Was it because this year I really enjoyed myself? Again I had Monsieur Hulot to thank that the departure wasn't too painful. It's hard to turn one's back on tedium and idleness. Boredom is comforting and reassuring.

That's the way we are. We spend three or four weeks at the sea, where every conceivable distraction is offered us on a plate, where an infinite variety of toys

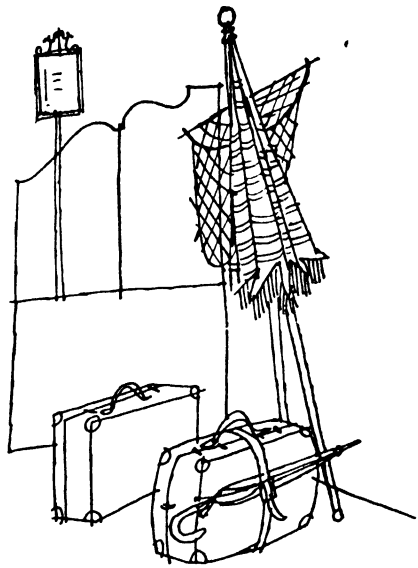
is thrust into our hands. And we reject the lot. We're like people crossing a fairground whose only concern is not to touch anything. And we cherish our torpor like a precious jewel. That explains the yawns which govern the hours and days passed at the Beach Hotel. That explains the mixture of love and hate I feel for the jetty, the shrimps, the bathing and the beach balls. A multitude of things never properly understood. A multitude of experiences never lived. The passers-by with whom I exchange nods but whom I never get to know. And when the time comes to say good-bye, I'm seized with a sort of terror. Where am I going? Why am I going? After all, these surroundings are as transient and artificial as I am.

At seven o'clock this morning the parasols were still sleeping in rows along the deserted beach. Folded and tied, they looked like trees in a winter orchard. The streets were silent. Only the postman and the milkman plied along the doors of the closed shops. A few fishermen were putting out to sea. The holiday-makers were invisible.

All this gave me a strange prevision of the beach a few weeks hence. I had the feeling that after my departure the whole town would disappear, that it was somehow tied to me, that it needed me no less than I needed it. Every visitor, I'm sure, feels the same way. He knows that the Beach Hotel closes down for the winter, that the parasols disappear, that the town must wait with empty buildings for the summer to coax it

back to life. At first he sees himself the lord and master of this disappearing world. But the impression of power is short-lived. He begins to realise the extent to which he resembles this artificial world, the extent to which it's constructed in his own image. So when he leaves he always feels a tug at his heart. Will he come again next year? Who knows? The magic attraction of these places is based on a mental certainty we never dare admit: it's unthinkable that we should die on holiday. But what about afterwards? Where are you off to, little old man in the white hat? Are you sure you still have another year in which to come and gaze at your reflection in this fugitive mirror?

*



Madame Dubreuilh, Martine, the Smuttes, the Freds, the Brazilian and Monsieur Hulot were all leaving at the same time as us this morning. We said good-bye to Madame Dubreuilh on the porch. Congratulations, cooing, exchanging of compliments and addresses. "You've helped to make our holiday . . ." "What a wonderful time we've had . . ." "Thanks again . . ." "If only it hadn't been for the wind . . ." Interminable effusions. Congratulated on all sides, Monsieur Ménard preserved the modest smile of the man who knows he's done his best. Monsieur Smutte arranged for the forwarding of any letters which might arrive during the next few days.

"Good-bye . . . Good-bye . . ."

"Telephone me as soon as you arrive. I'm always in at lunch-time . . ."

"Do let's hear from you . . ."

"And if you're ever passing through Sèvres, don't fail to look us up . . ."

Nearly all the hotel guests had got up to see us off. For them it was a sort of dress-rehearsal. The Colonel and his wife were staying on. Also the coquette. She threw her arms round the Brazilian who was holding out his hand.

"Ah, no! Today you get a kiss!"

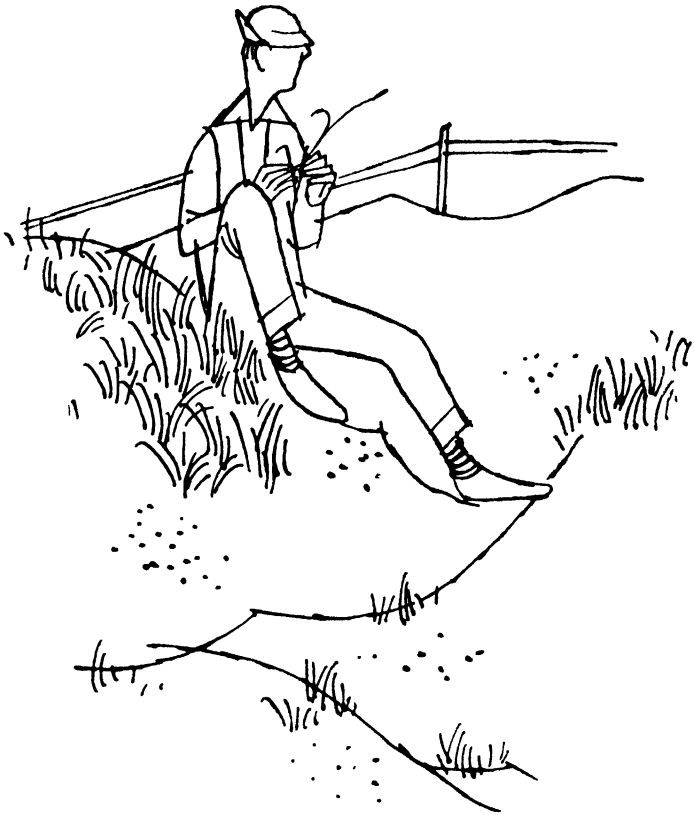
The Brazilian kissed the already thickly-powdered cheeks. A smile of defeat hovered about his lips.

The ballet of the trunks. The inventory of bags and

cases. All the travellers were dressed in their town clothes. Without his striped vest, cap and shorts, Monsieur Fred was unrecognisable. Even his pipe was at a conventional angle. After a night of panic (the store of fireworks had been completely used up) the guests thronged the steps as if on a station platform. At last we were off. First the intellectual, then the athlete took leave of Martine. She treated them both with identical amiability. No bond remained. Perhaps a photo. Nothing more.

Monsieur Hulot arrived. He, too, was in his Sunday best. But his nose was patched with sticking plaster, palpable evidence of a recent injury and of his complicity in the night's disorders.

Cheerfully he mounted the steps, his hand stretched to say good-bye to the first comer. The Colonel! But the Colonel turned his head. An enemy is always an enemy. An officer, even an officer on the retired list, never surrenders. Forgiveness is not one of the military virtues. Monsieur Hulot drew back. Martine, patting her hair into place, was leaning up against the balustrade and staring out across the absinthe-coloured sea. The general leave-taking continued. Towering over everyone, still not understanding what was the matter, Hulot lingered a few moments longer, swivelling in all directions. No one condescended to shake his outstretched hand. The Colonel was standing between him and Martine. Finally, looking very crestfallen, supporting himself against the balustrade, Hulot



went down the steps again. Then he wandered off, though he kept glancing back.

He sat down by himself on a bank at the side of the road.

"The bus!" cried Madame Fred.

"Hurry up!"

"Good-bye! Good-bye!"

The travellers dashed down the steps. My wife followed them. And, gripping a suitcase and a hold-all, I followed my wife.

But I didn't hurry. I had time enough. Until the moment the bus left, I was still on holiday. And it wouldn't leave without me. I let the travellers get well ahead.

It was now or never. I must make the gesture I'd been silently planning, the gesture which, for me, represented the very summit of audacity. Put yourself in my place and you'll understand. Possibly for the first time in my life I was about to flaunt public opinion. This was my moment of truth. I must not falter. I had everything worked out and the time was propitious. Courage, old chap. They won't eat you (except with their eyes). They put Hulot into quarantine. But it's too late for them to do the same to you. And, anyway, they're probably too busy even to notice you.

The Colonel, Monsieur Smutte, Monsieur Fred—everyone had ignored Monsieur Hulot. Accidentally he'd rubbed them up the wrong way, and now they wouldn't even give him a farewell nod (the nod which, after all, one gives the least acquaintance). I simply couldn't do it. Besides, I had a debt to pay, a debt of gaiety. One thanks one's host for a good holiday.

Passing close to Hulot, who'd turned his back on the road, I put down my bags and went up to him. He

heard me and raised his head. The plaster on his nose looked like part of a clown's make-up. I stretched out my hand.

"Good-bye, monsieur," I said. "Till . . . till next time."

I fumbled in my pocket.

"Here's my address," I added.

I handed him my card.

Then, without looking at him, I hurried away. I picked up my cases and went over to the bus. People were milling all round it. As I quickened my pace, I heard a woman's voice behind me. I turned. Miss Topping had also had the same idea. She was vigorously pumping Hulot's hand, whilst the latter was politely raising his hat.

I felt a strange sense of loss. It was good not to be alone in one's rebellion. But at the same time it was disappointing. There are moments when one actually wants to attract the full blast of the scandal one has provoked.

Miss Topping pronounced a few cordial words.

". . . Wonderful time . . . next year . . ."

Almost running, I rejoined my wife who was waiting for me. The driver and conductor were hoisting the luggage on to the roof. More kisses. More good-byes. Would it never end? Martine had taken her place in the front of the bus. She was smiling slightly. Was she thinking of Hulot? Why not? Hadn't he, day after day, presented her with a smile?

Before getting in, the Brazilian glanced sideways at the Beach Hotel. No handkerchief was fluttering for him, no tender hand waving good-bye. The coquette had already forgotten him completely.

"Hurry up," said my wife, "or we'll have to stand. Like when we came."

"You're right."

All the other seats being full, we sat down at the back. I peered out of the window. Monsieur Hulot was still sitting where I'd left him, completely alone. I saw him get slowly to his feet. He tossed a pebble at the sand, then thrust his hands, his rejected hands, deep into the pockets of his white trousers.

Head drooping, knees lightly flexed, walking exactly like anybody else now, he made his way over to his car outside the hotel. His baggage was all ready. He bent over the starting-handle.

The bus moved off, bristling with handkerchiefs and waving hands. The Beach Hotel and the shuttered villa slowly disappeared from sight. Along the promenade our friends of yesterday watched our departure with indifference. Very gently, in the slightly damp morning air, the white houses of the little town seemed to draw together and huddle against each other. The road climbed. Before the turning which cuts off the view of the coast, I had the good luck to catch a last glimpse of the sea. It looked like a thin, grey line in the distance.

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